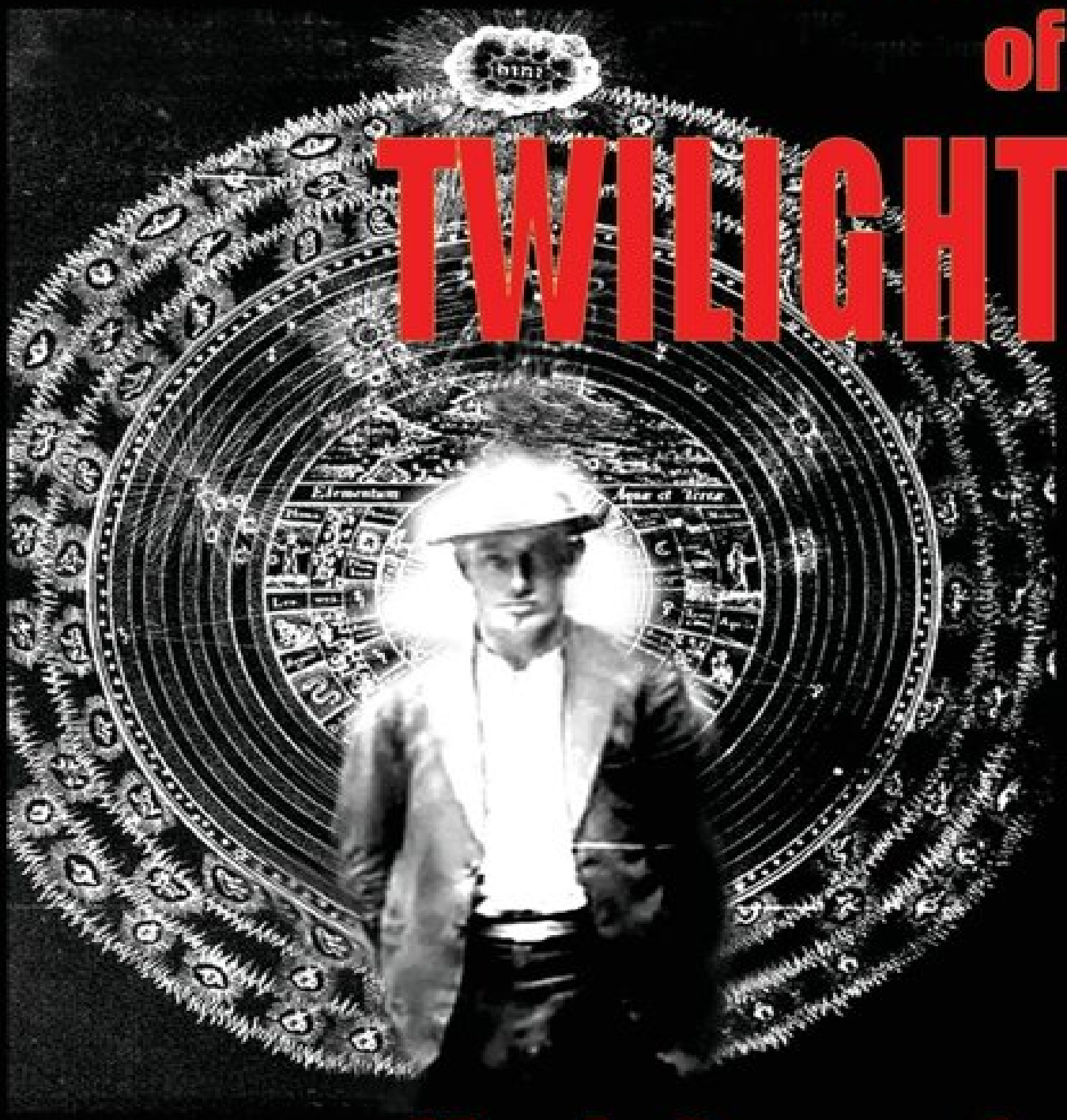
The Face of TWILIGHT



Mark Samuels

THE FACE OF TWILIGHT

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

PREFACE

When I came to prepare this short novel for republication I had not looked over the text since its first appearance in 2006. Indeed, I scarcely ever re-read my own work except out of necessity (as in the current instance). All too often when I return to older material there are portions I would alter, delete or add to; and the impulse strikes me as pernicious. My initial instinct was to ruthlessly expunge half of the book and produce a taut novella. I found that the plot meandered and the characters therein were not at all life-like. Having reached the end of the book, however, it was patently clear that what I took for faults were really integral to its structure and characterisation – because it did not set out to be a 'conventional' novel in the first instance.

So, the changes I have made have been minimal. One or two flagrant abuses tending to self-indulgence have been excised, but otherwise the thing is as it was back in 2006.

I wish I could say the same for some of the locales described therein. The 'Rochester' Pub, thriving when I first wrote the book is now empty and has been so for two years having fallen to property developers (like so many other pubs across the U.K.). People habitually fiddle with smartphones rather than packets of cigarettes in pubs – and even I was forced to give up smoking tobacco two years ago.

I could further describe the changes during the decade since this book first appeared; but I am told that time waits for no-one and am also assured – often vociferously – that one cannot criticise 'progress'.

Mark Samuels, London 2016.

Now defunct Winchester Pub, basis for The 'Rochester' Pub (2008)

"The 'Rochester' Pub, thriving when I first wrote the book is now empty and has been so for two years having fallen to property developers (like so many other pubs across the U.K.)."

“What if nightmares were cries from hell? What if nightmares literally took place in hell? Why not? Everything is so strange that even this is possible.”

– Jorge Luis Borges

CHAPTER ONE

IVAN GILMAN HAD little choice when it came to deciding to rent the studio flat on the Archway Road. His departure from his last address was owing to a gas explosion on the top floor of the listed nineteen-thirties building in which he'd roomed for ten years. To say that this was unfortunate for him was understating matters. His former landlord had been an elderly, befuddled recluse who rarely troubled to collect the rent, having long since paid off the mortgage on the property. The structural damage caused by the explosion forced the building to be declared unsafe for human habitation and it would be demolished in a matter of weeks. During this period Gilman was forced to room in a mangy bed and breakfast hotel in Finsbury Park while he searched for new accommodation.

Accordingly, Gilman found himself forced to resort to the lottery of the London flat-renting market. His first impression, after reading through free advertisement papers, was that in order to afford a roof over his head he would have to starve (giving up the booze was unthinkable). He circled the cheapest property ads, but upon phoning the number given found that they had invariably "just gone" although a more expensive (and unadvertised) option was often still available.

Gilman had little money for a simple reason: his books didn't sell. Just enough royalty fees trickled in to keep him from destitution. He'd already almost spent the advance on his next book, and that was three months overdue. At least the explosion had done him one favour: he had a credible excuse for his agent and publishers. The event had featured in the papers; they knew where he lived, and his excuse was impeccable. "His computer hopelessly damaged in the blast: his hard-drive and backup disks lost!

Months of work down the drain.” The reality, though, was one of prevarication, of several pages of hand-scribbled notes created in the pubs where he went to drink and write just before intoxication kicked in.

Of course in the past he’d not worked that way. His first book, The Unsatisfied Thirst, had been written in the stark and clear grip of sobriety. It was well received, being described by the TLS as “a vivid and powerful depiction of the dilemma at the heart of authentic nihilism.” Hardly anyone read or bought the thing, though it was known.The sort of novel that one looks at, but returns to the bookshelf after a cursory glance: a novel of ideas, not of character development and not displaying a social conscience. It was only after this first book that Gilman used alcohol to bolster his confidence. He was terrified of the thought of failure. The clarity of his prose disappeared and the next novel, Terminal Cases, was a hazy, booze driven stream-ofconsciousness narrative, relying on the cut-up techniques of William Burroughs. The critics had hailed it as an interesting experiment by Gilman: a precursor to greater work, a novel of great ambition but confused and hackneyed design.

His third book was written on the back of beer-mats, on scraps of paper, along the margins of newspapers, on bus tickets, on whatever was to hand when the boozy muse favoured him. Whatever Gilman was trying to achieve in those scraps only became crystal clear in a state where expressing his intentions coherently was impossible. These fragments simply could not be fitted together to make a whole.

It was probably the pub, The Rochester, close to the flat in Archway Road that helped Gilman reach his decision about renting it. He had arranged to see the property during the afternoon and, arriving there an hour and a half early, had wandered into the pub in order to relax via three pints of beer and a couple of whisky chasers. The place was deserted except for himself and a teenage barmaid with a thick cockney accent who was serving. Her

conversation was limited, though she was friendly enough, and so Gilman took out one of his dog-eared notebooks from his shoulder bag. As he sat there supping his pint, he found that he was writing away happily, much as he had done in the days of his second novel, with ideas coming to him on the wave crest of alcohol, rather than their breaking on the rocks of inebriation. Such was his delight that he almost forgot he had an appointment and he lurched out of the pub several minutes late. It was a good place to think, one of those cathedrals for the devout wordsmith.

Luckily, the person he was to meet was just leaving the flat and Gilman was in time to catch her before she disappeared.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” he said to her, betraying absolutely no signs of being slightly drunk, and feeling poised on that intake moment where self-confidence is assured, “it was murderous catching a bus up the hill.”

The woman, or more precisely the landlady, Rebecca Brown, was younger than he’d expected, somewhere in her middle thirties. She was slim with long black hair and a painfully shy manner. Her clothes would not have been out of place in the seventies. Gilman suspected that she had bought the studio flat specifically to rent it out.

“That’s OK. You must be Ivan Gilman.”

“Yep.”

“Well, let’s go inside and I’ll show you the flat.”

They passed along a lengthy, narrow, hall passage with a cheap, grey carpet. The ground floor was given over to an Indian convenience store and off-licence whose entrance was directly next-door. The two climbed a stairway that made two turns.

There was a doorway at the end of a corridor that led off from the first floor landing. Another flat, Gilman thought to himself. They passed up a further flight of stairs to the second floor landing which had a window overlooking the side of the Rochester pub.

“Here we are,” said Rebecca Brown, as she unlocked the door and swung it wide. Gilman stepped inside.

It was smaller, much smaller, than his old place: the living area contained lounge, kitchenette and bedroom, with only a separate toilet and bathroom. But it would serve.

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They’d agreed on a price for the rent and Gilman had even managed to get the cost of bills included. It was slightly more than he could afford even with that concession, but he realised that it was unlikely he’d find anything better or cheaper. Moreover, Rebecca Brown preferred to be paid in cash every two weeks and he felt that she might be sympathetic should he fall slightly behind in his payments. She’d appeared pleased to learn that he was a writer. She herself claimed to be of an artistic temperament and ran a New-Age shop a little distance away over in Hampstead Garden Suburb.

They’d arranged to meet tomorrow at the flat where Gilman would hand over the first month’s rent in advance and collect the keys from her.

His possessions were in storage with a removal company called Mund Associates, some weird workers co-operative, just across from Finsbury Park. After he left Rebecca Brown, Gilman went back over to the Rochester pub. He’d need to phone Mr Mund at some point that afternoon.

No more than twenty paces from his front door, the historical Rochester pub occupied the northern corner of the block just south of his new flat. Its interior had not altered greatly since the 1930s: it possessed a high ceiling with carved wooden walls and mirrored divides. The counter ran right the way from one side of the place to the other in a rectangle and Gilman believed that the only substantial alteration to the pub’s original interior was its conversion into a single space after having previously housed saloon and public bars. Some comfortable leather sofas had been placed underneath the windows but Gilman preferred to sit at the bar itself, perched on a stool, so that he could gain the attention of the bar staff more easily as he required service.

Looking at his watch he saw that it had just gone four p.m. A very fat and short man who appeared to be the landlord waddled out of a doorway behind the bar. It was the way he carried himself that indicated he was not simply a barman. A barman rarely sizes up his customer, and is content to serve him without judgment. However the landlord of a free house invariably has a harder look, as if to let the customer know that this is his domain and, unless an individual is part of the landlord’s regular drinking tribe, he is really only there on probation. There is always a part of the landlord that demands he likes you. If he does, you are served quickly. If not, and the more he dislikes you, the slower is the service.

The landlord came over and Gilman nodded at him.

“Pint of best bitter, please,” Gilman said. The cockney barmaid who had earlier served Gilman was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she was the landlord’s daughter. There was a certain similarity in their features.

Gilman watched the man as he drew the pint. A bead of sweat had made its way from the back of the landlord’s shaven head to the edge of his chin. As he bent forward, Gilman saw it gather as if to drop and fall into the foaming ale. But, just in time, the glass was placed on the counter and the droplet splattered instead onto the t-shirt stretched across his protruding gut.

“Two pound, that’ll be.”

Gilman fished in his pocket and came up with the exact change. He placed the coins on the counter, drank a mouthful of the beer and cast his gaze around.

There was a television set perched on a shelf in the far corner showing a race meeting and two men sat and watched it. They must have made their way into the Rochester while Gilman was viewing the flat. A series of newspapers were spread out on the counter before them. Between races their concentration was taken up with the papers’ crossword puzzles. One of the two was wearing a suit and seemed to be a senior enough person in his business that he was able to take the afternoon off without being challenged. The other man had long grey hair and was more down at heel. The former smoked cigars, the latter roll-ups. They were of a similar age,

both late forties, and by the way the landlord perched himself alongside them, were of “the tribe”.

Gilman picked up his drink and took another mouthful as he walked over to the pub’s pay phone. He perched the pint glass on top and dialled the number of the Storage Company. When he got through to Mund he fed a coin into the machine and arranged for them to collect him and move his personal belongings to the new flat the next day. He didn’t own much more than some bookcases, several boxes of books and his battered old desktop computer anyway.

Once the call was over, he gulped down the remainder of his pint and ordered another. Feeling a little more relaxed and light-headed again, he took out his notebook from his shoulder bag, settled down in one of the comfy sofas underneath the windows and began to jot down some images that had begun to formulate in his mind.

When he looked up from his notebook, it must have been close to an hour later and he’d filled three pages with his thoughts. The writing was an extended meditation on desolate urban spaces: waste grounds, abandoned hospitals, demolition sites and the burnt out shells of houses. Quite how he could fit the images into the proposed novel was not clear but certainly writing about them had relieved some of the pressure in his brain.

The pub was filling up with the post-work crowd. Gilman’s glass was empty again and he went to the bar to remedy the situation. The two men he’d seen earlier had now turned their full attention to their crossword puzzles, the horse race meeting having finished. As Gilman waited to be served, he saw the one in the blue suit wander around the bar to retrieve a large dictionary from under the counter. The two men had obviously noticed

Gilman sitting and writing and took him for an expert when it came to finding the right word. The one in the suit looked at him confidentially and said:

“We’re stuck on the last clue, mate. Seven Down. A reverse Spanish bravo (not hers) found in heaven, perhaps? Six letters, something L something H something M. Any idea?”

Gilman took the paper from him, looked at the blank space and racked his brains. Nothing. As he gazed vacantly, the landlord refilled his pint glass, and he passed two pound coins over the counter.

“Hang on, Mike, I’ve got it: Elohim!” said the down-at-heel man, with long silvery grey hair and a hand-rolled cigarette drooping from his lower lip.

“Elohim, eh, Harry? What’s that then?”

“Like Yahweh, another name for God.”

His friend, Mike, looked crestfallen. He was a short, tubby man with glasses, ginger hair and a beard. He pulled at the lapels of his navy-blue suit in a display of irritation. Gilman wondered if they went through this ritual every day: competing with each other to finish their crosswords over pints and not leaving until the puzzles were done or the two had drunk so much that they no longer cared. It looked that way.

“Mind if I borrow your paper to look at?” Gilman said.

Mike nodded.

“No use for it anymore, take it,” he said, muttering into his glass of whisky, and exhaling a cloud of cigar smoke,“…bloody hell… Elohim.”

Gilman wandered back over to his seat. A buzz of conversation had started to fill the air, though not yet that louder, less self-conscious drone that would hold sway in an hour or so as voices were raised in alcoholfuelled protestation or laughter.

The newspaper contained little of interest. There was the threat of riots in one of the cities in the midlands. Speculation that two murders in North London were the work of the same man. The Chancellor threatened to raise taxes. Tension in the Middle East.

Gilman’s head felt as if it were pleasantly spinning. He nodded to Mike and Harry as he left the Rochester to make his way back to Finsbury Park, to spend his last evening in that dump of a bed and breakfast.

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Gilman listened patiently as the East German continued with his diatribe.

“It’s like this, you see.” Mr Mund said in his highly fluent English, “Liberal democracy is just a front for global corporations. We need the working class to rise up as an international brotherhood and take back the means of production.”

Although he nodded occasionally, Gilman had little interest in the man’s views.

“So, what do you do, then?” Mund asked.

“I’m an author,” Gilman responded.

“Writers need to take a Party line. In these times, propaganda is a vital weapon in the struggle. I think the appalling social conditions in the West means writers have a duty to class solidarity and socialism first and their own bourgeois preferences last.”

They were sat in the front of the East German’s large white van crawling at a snail’s pace along Junction Road. Gilman’s worldly belongings were in the back of the vehicle. He had been impressed by the strength of Mund, who despite bearing a heavy paunch had moved everything swiftly and with a lack of effort. But if his industry was enviable his continual chattering proved tedious.

“If we can change the system everyone will be equal and therefore free. You agree that Capitalism is a crime against humanity don’t you?”

“I’m no advocate of a total free-market, if that’s what you mean,” Gilman said.

“We must liberate the oppressed masses…”

Unfortunately, Gilman had to endure this man’s analysis of world affairs for a further fifteen minutes before they finally reached the point on Archway Road where his studio flat was located. The traffic had been terrible and since he was to pay Mund by the hour, Gilman’s pocket was bound to suffer accordingly. But Comrade Mund moved even more swiftly to unload Gilman’s belongings than he had when loading them into the van to begin with. Perhaps he had another appointment, or perhaps he mistook Gilman’s politeness for agreement with his worldview and felt kindly disposed towards him.

Gilman stood by the van parked outside the front door as Comrade Mund piled everything into the narrow ground floor hallway and then carried the items up the stairs one by one without the slightest sign of tiredness. Gilman felt a twinge of guilt at all this labour going on in front of his eyes and had to resist the temptation to help. He was, after all, paying to do nothing himself. Still, he felt awkward.

Once Mund had finished and everything was neatly stacked in the second floor studio flat, Gilman counted out the money he owed Mund, handed it over to him and was left alone in his new home. The place seemed smaller

than when he’d seen it yesterday. The living area was about twenty by seventeen square feet with two windows overlooking the Archway Road. The north wall sloped diagonally but at the highest part of the slope was a door leading to a separate bathroom and then to a toilet (the latter a tiny room that appeared to have once been an airing cupboard). There were numerous shelves on the walls that would be handy for his small book collection.

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Gilman did some unpacking of essentials, clothes, toiletries, crockery and cutlery and then decided that he couldn’t face doing anything further of that sort. He wanted to write. And in order to bolster confidence he also required booze. Now he had to decide whether to go out and bring back booze from the nearby off-licence over which his flat was located or wander across to the Rochester pub.

The weather outside was pleasant enough. It was warm, and a milky sun shone through the gauze of high cloud. He’d noticed that the Rochester had a sunken courtyard at the back. It was just visible from the window on the landing immediately outside his flat. So he decided that it would be better to sit there in the fresh air and see what results wielding his trusty old Waterman pen would bring.

Once Gilman had left and descended the stairs to the first floor, he encountered his new neighbour who was on his way into his own flat. He was a slightly-built man just over five feet tall. His skull was closely shaven and numerous ugly scars marked the upper portion of his face. Despite these, one might – at first glance – think he was inoffensive. And yet closer observation revealed a distinctly unpleasant air, some hint of cruel

detachment that Gilman could not quite fathom. The man's eyes were heavy-lidded with dark rings beneath them. He was clad in a crumpled full-length raincoat and carried a black leather bag with clasp handles. It looked like a country doctor's old-fashioned medical kitbag. A name was embossed on the side in faded gilt: Stymm.

The stranger's small hand stretched out to shake Gilman's own.

"I'm glad to meet you."

"Conrad Stymm," the man introduced himself. He said nothing more, and slowly traversed the short distance along the corridor to his flat, letting himself inside without even a backward glance at Gilman.

His handshake had been cold and feeble and Gilman wiped his palm involuntarily on his jeans before he carried on downstairs. And why did the man wear a raincoat in the middle of summer without a threat of rain forecast? It looked to Gilman as if Stymm was disturbed. His eyes had been like empty windows in the burnt-out shell of a building.

Anyway, in a few moments booze would be raising his mood and he would be lost in his plans for the third novel. He had no time to waste thinking about weirdos.

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The courtyard at the back of the Rochester proved to be a pleasant place to relax and was almost deserted. There was no-one there except a couple who were canoodling in one of the corner benches, completely lost in each other's eyes. A luxuriant array of plants and flowers hung in baskets around the walls and along the fire escape which one had to descend in order to reach the courtyard. The wooden bench tables were widely spread out and a single, small tree had been planted in the centre of the space. Since the sheer back wall of the pub obscured the western view, the courtyard got no sun in the late afternoon and evening but was, as a consequence, refreshingly cool in the summer.

Gilman swallowed a mouthful of his third double whisky and soda and ran his hand across his mouth. In his other hand the fountain pen he wielded fairly raced across the pages of his notebook. He wrote of the city as a gigantic and tattered circus tent filled with acts that terrified the bedraggled audience: insanity, suicides, car crashes, stabbings, shootings, drug overdoses, heart attacks, and disease. Grinning, decayed clowns hauled their unwilling victims from the audience and danced them around the ring until their role in the mummery was over and they perished. And as the show went on more and more customers rolled up from the outside to take the place of those who were gone. Laughter turns into screams.

Gilman looked at what he'd written and drew a line through the page. The image suddenly seemed gaudy and useless. Why not instead an immense series of hospital buildings where the sick operated on the healthy? Disease was deliberately spread; those already whole were maimed and those already content turned into lunatics: a city beneath a sodium-orange moon where the stars could no longer be seen.

No, it still felt no good to Gilman. His glass was empty and it was time he replenished it. He got up and left his notebook on the bench table. As he did so his gaze wandered across and upwards to the window immediately

outside his studio flat. The light was on and Stymm stood there gazing directly down into the courtyard at Gilman, as if he had been watching him the whole time.

His expression was imperturbable and he stared without blinking. Gilman wondered what he was doing up there, on the second floor rather than the first where his own flat was located. He has no right to hang around outside my door, spying on me, Gilman thought. But then again Gilman passed along Stymm's corridor everyday and thought nothing of it. OK but he himself didn't have a choice – he had to – in order to leave the building, but that didn't mean that the corridor outside his flat was his own private domain. Perhaps Stymm was drawn by the view, and wanted to see if any friends of his were in the courtyard, perhaps he met people here …

As Gilman stood there ruminating, Stymm half-turned and walked away from the window. The light went out.

Gilman made for the bar and, after he'd got his drink and guzzled the first few mouthfuls, he saw that there was nothing to be done but put his notebook away and abandon any hope of further coherent expression. He sat there alone in the courtyard – even the loving couple had deserted it – until the young cockney barmaid he'd noticed the day before came down the fire escape and told him that they were closing in ten minutes.

CHAPTER TWO

OVER THE NEXT few days Gilman became aware of the odd hours that Stymm kept. He would hear him noisily slam the door downstairs on his departures and arrivals. Usually he left late at night, around ten p.m. and would return close to dawn. Gilman thought that the man must have an unusual job; that of a night watchman seemed out of the question due to his slight, small frame.

Such distractions preyed on Gilman's mind and he half-heartedly blamed them for the lack of progress he'd made with his third novel. Further visits to the Rochester were not encouraging. He found that he was repeating himself and going over ground that he'd explored in the first two books. He had also developed a strange fascination with nearby Archway Bridge. Pretty much everyone he'd spoken to about it in the Rochester called it "Suicide Bridge", due to the unusually large number of people who decided to do away with themselves there, and it was the subject of several urban myths.

The bridge spanned the A1 motorway and formed part of Hornsey Lane. Its design was late Victorian, embellished by a series of lamps around whose bases curled carved sea creatures. Both sides of the bridge bore the date "1897" which would, Gilman knew, tie in with the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. He knew little else about the construct, except for the grim stories that Mike and Harry had related during an idle afternoon at the Rochester, when he'd mentioned his interest in it.

The first of the stories concerned a man who had been clearly seen jumping from the bridge by a passer-by. He phoned the emergency services and an ambulance arrived but could find no trace whatsoever of a body on the motorway below. The jumper had vanished into thin air. However, in Scotland, the next day, the driver of an open-top lorry who had passed under the bridge at the time the passer-by had seen the jumper, contacted the police as he'd discovered a mangled corpse in the back of his vehicle.

The second was that of the ghost of a jilted lover who'd plunged to his death in despair. His spectral voice could be heard hopelessly calling the name of his sweetheart, "Molly", over and over again on the bridge at night.

Worried and agitated by the fact that he was making no progress with the novel, Gilman's sleep patterns were ruined. He stayed up late into the night, surfing the internet, until he found the third distraction that he could not shake off. He developed a preoccupation with apocalyptic sects, especially of the urban variety: those whose obsessions touched upon the occult science, or lore, of cities of the dead.

On one of these websites Gilman discovered a powerful array of images of desolation in London: abandoned buildings such as hospitals, warehouses, dockyard wharves, tower blocks, and tram depots, all manner of sites, filled with mad graffiti. And this graffiti, it was claimed in the accompanying text, was in the form of magical symbols designed to raise the dead. It spoke of a great experiment in which London was at the centre of a network of dark occult forces. The anonymous author of this text held that the living are the intruders into the metropolis, and that none who die within its confines pass away but are sustained by the electricity coursing through the city, and by the radiation from TV screens, from computers, from mobile phones and other transmitters. Concentrated energy capturing diseased souls enraptured by the neon glare.

And for some reason Gilman felt that these three obsessions were linked and not just diversions whose only connection lay in his mind. It was true, perhaps even likely, that Stymm was a very ordinary man, that Archway Bridge was only a Victorian bridge and that the author of the website were simply a bunch of deluded faux-psychogeographers. Perhaps, given the starvation of creative work over which to concentrate, his imagination now worked along fantastic lines in the real world, but in any case he resolved to find out.

One of the photographs on the website showed the interior of an abandoned television station in a nearby corner of North London. It had been one of the earliest TV studios and had its own transmitter mast above the roof. The experimental broadcasts made there had ceased in the late 1920s, long before they were commercially viable and before operations were switched to nearby Alexandra Palace. The location of the structure was revealed but the text accompanying the image stated clearly that one had to approach the building by a certain convoluted route in order to experience the energy forces that it harboured within. This was part of a ritual, a psychometropolitan process whereby one is prepared for the revelation, where the very streets that lead to the final destination facilitate the necessary mental state.

The website informed Gilman that once the initiate had arrived at the building, after following the correct route, he would be compelled to add his own mystical symbols to those already scrawled on the walls. And that a certain transfiguration would then take place in the shadows.

On a rainy morning when Gilman found himself restless and suffering from a mild claustrophobia, he carefully noted down the route from the website and then highlighted it into his tattered old bookmap of London streets. He

covered himself with a long anorak, a hat with a wide brim and waterproof trousers. When he needed to consult his map he would have to step into a doorway to avoid the rain, for it was twenty years old and its pages were yellowed and brittle, and sure to be damaged even further by water. He packed it carefully away inside his shoulder bag, along with his notebook and a flask of whisky.

Outside, on the Archway Road, the rain was falling more heavily than Gilman had realised. The endless flow of traffic hurtled along the road's greasy tarmac, making a continuous watery noise. Although it was only mid-morning, some of the vehicles had their headlights turned on. Low, dark-grey clouds gave everything the appearance of being veiled in an everlasting twilight.

The first portion of the approach ritual required him to begin from Archway Underground Station.

So Gilman made his way downhill, passing under Archway Bridge, with its emblems of the three swords of Middlesex on the north side and paused beneath it to take a first swig from his flask of whisky. He looked up at the curved girders of the underneath and could not help thinking of those who had fallen to their deaths from above. He had not yet stood upon the platform overhead and actually felt a sense of dread at the prospect of doing so. Despite the traffic and the noise, there was a melancholy atmosphere about the place that depressed Gilman with unaccountable force.

He carried on down the hill, past a black lamp-post that had been vertically spray painted with the two words ENDS MENTAL, like the title on the spine of a book. In the distance, the low grey clouds obscured the panoramic view of the city of London, though once or twice a great

Babylonian tower half-emerged from the mist before being swallowed up again.

At the bottom of the hill, he turned right and reached the beginning of the ritualistic route. It was first required that one contemplated the Archway Tower – a great black monolith that had gone up in the 1970s above the Underground Station – then the office blocks that clustered around it, such as Hill House, with its deteriorating and shabby exterior. Gilman wandered down to the shopping precinct below with its series of failed businesses, shielded by graffiti-covered metal shutters. There was a blocked-up entrance to the subterranean walkways that ran beneath Highgate Hill, Tollhouse Way and across to the Archway Road. Numerous empty-eyed tramps and human debris were sprawled in doorways, sheltering from the rain and swigging cans of Tennents' Super. Gilman climbed up to a concrete walkway that led around the edges of the office blocks and looked up to see one of the workers gazing out of the window, his face a blurred shell, as if all his features had been washed away.

Whether it was a trick of the light he could not say, but it appeared that everyone he saw inside that building, through the rain-splattered windows, had the same void faces.

Gilman trudged away up Highgate Hill, passed the strange little statue of Whittington's cat perched on a stone, and the great eponymous hospital on the hill. Gilman had once spent time there, having broken his leg after a nasty fall, and he remembered the long, eerie corridors, the trolleys whispering across the linoleum, the low moans and the omnipresent smell of carbolic. Once, during his brief stay and on a night when he could not sleep, he had wandered around the place on his crutches and found himself in the cancer ward on the third floor. There he had a conversation with a man whose face had been ruined by skin cancer: one half of it was like a

grey fungus. It was obvious that he was close to death and he had laughed when Gilman asked him if he believed in an afterlife.

“No,” he said feebly. “I pray for my total destruction. Consciousness is agony.”

Consciousness is agony. Gilman had carried the burden of those words with him thereafter. Consciousness is agony.

ENDS MENTAL.

There was that graffiti again. Someone had sprayed the same words on another lamp post, this time on the approach to St Joseph’s Catholic Church. Its great green dome dominated the skyline, one of the seven huge Romanist churches erected on hills in order to impress the wayward with the grandeur and righteousness of the usurped old faith. In front of the church building was a statue of the Saint, expending his right hand in beatific blessing, as if the whole city of London below were being absolved.

Once past the church he turned left across Waterlow Park. The rain had kept up a steady tempo, and few persons were around in the lush green open spaces. Settling himself on a bench, Gilman took another shot of whisky from his flask. His legs and lungs protested at the steep climb he’d just endured and cold sweat, like condensation, had collected on his skin.

The whisky burnt his throat and warmed his stomach. With a little liquid fuel inside him, he felt able to continue on his trek. He was soon at the gates

of the park opposite the imposing gravel parkway of the old west half of Highgate Cemetery on the other side of Swains' Lane. But that region formed no part of the route marked out on the bookmap and Gilman had to endure an even steeper climb than that he'd just undergone – up the incline to the very summit of the hill at Pond Square and into the heart of Highgate Village. As he forced himself up Swains Lane he could almost believe that he was in some remote part of the countryside. The overhanging branches of trees pressed upon him from both sides of the road, dripping with rain water, their leaves sagging or fallen from the deluge. It was an exhausting uphill slog and underfoot mulch made the ascent slippery and perilous.

At the very top of the climb, the road narrowed and debouched into Pond Square. To Gilman's right was the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institution, a two-storey whitewashed Georgian building. Looking at his notes Gilman saw that the website creator had marked this place down as being of considerable significance. The establishment contained (in a special collection) a number of works by one of the precursors of their lore, a scholar called Alfred Muswell. This person had been the progenitor of many extravagant theories, including the idea that it is entirely possible to, as he put it, get "behind the scenery of what we take to be reality; that there are London streets that lead to another world impinging on this one". And all that it requires is that one follows the trail pioneers such as him had blazed. The man had left behind coded routes in his works that the website author claimed to have discovered.

Now, once Gilman stood within Pond Square itself, the spire of the television mast that was his destination was clearly visible. It rose black and awful above the huddled Georgian houses like a ragged tear in the fabric of the dark grey sky.

He briefly took shelter from the rain in the middle of the square underneath the overhanging roof of an abandoned public lavatory. The television

station studios did not seem to appear to be more than four minutes walk away. In order to keep the spire in sight, and in accordance with the explicit route provided by the website, he had to follow the twists and turns of a series of antique alleyways just off the square. The rain made the cobblestones underfoot slippery. The walls were slimy and close together, their brickwork in a state of shocking decay. The path he followed was crooked and the passageway was slightly tilted at an angle, so much so that he felt himself leaning to one side.

Finally he emerged into a further square. The rain had ceased falling and a clammy wind blew across the open space, hurling mouldering leaves in its wake. The square was surrounded by low, filthy cottages whose windows were broken and whose roofs sagged inwards. Then Gilman spied a concrete, modernist block straight ahead with a skeletal transmission mast on its flat roof. The building was not tall and stood at the far end of the square, amongst a cluster of stunted, dead trees. It was raised up on its own plateau, walled-in by a small hill.

Outside, by the gates on the path leading up to the studios, was a noticeboard. Its black paint was peeling away and what was written on it scarcely legible. Gilman leant closer to the board, convinced that either his eyes or the dimming light were playing tricks on him, for he thought he read the word “necro…hs”. He reached inside his shoulder bag and drew out the flask of whisky, taking a long draught from it. He looked again at the route he’d highlighted on the bookmap. He could not locate this unmarked region of limbo beyond Pond Square.

Yet the place had nothing of the otherworldly about it, and struck one instead of merely having been abandoned. He’d seen similar spots when he was a young boy, down in the docklands before the redevelopment in the nineteen-eighties. Stark, grey and meaningless as those places were, this square was even worse. Not that it had been totally forgotten. The walls had

been spray-painted with graffiti and amongst the grass and weeds were empty bottles of booze, cans, discarded food packages and even some condoms and syringes.

Gilman looked at his watch. Though it showed eleven a.m., the gloom around him was more like twilight.

The doors to the television studios were not locked and he entered easily. The sound of birds nesting within the high roof greeted him. It was almost dark inside, with only a feeble light from the shattered square windows providing any illumination. The floor was ruinous, having given way in several places. A television console with cracked screens was caked with pigeon shit. Wires snaked across the broken floor amidst heaps of discarded technical equipment, rusted cameras, booms and lighting.

Gilman had to wander around with extreme caution. He found the same signs of visitation as he had outside, the same debris left by derelicts of the human race. The walls here were a virtual labyrinth of graffiti, all merging and spiralling into a series of words that dizzied the mind. And mixed in with the words were symbols and designs that seemed to somehow complement them in a manner that Gilman could not quite grasp.

But, despite the fact it got darker and darker, Gilman sat down, took a marker pen from his bag and began to fill in the spaces between the spirals and whirls, working across the nearest wall inch by agonising inch, even when he could no longer see anything.

Ж

With a start Gilman awoke in the ground floor entrance doorway to his own flat. He was sprawled on the sticky black floor tiles, clutching a half bottle of whisky. His hat was pulled down over his face and the vomit that covered the front of his anorak ensured he'd been ignored by passers-by and simply taken for a down-and-out. It was the middle of the night, gone four a.m. His mouth felt furry, and dried traces of white drool caked his chin.

He'd lost hours. His last memory was of the television studio foyer and scrawling numbers between the words and symbols.

All along the white wall of the entranceway in which he lay, Gilman saw, in the orange haze of the nearest streetlight, indecipherable characters written over and over again in whorls. Just that and nothing more.

"Archway Bridge"

CHAPTER THREE

GILMAN AWOKE. THE room was drowned in grey light and rain beat at the window.

The night before he must have hauled himself up the stairs in a drunken stupor and torn the soaking clothes from his body, leaving them on the floor in a sodden heap. The bed sheets were still damp with rainwater from his naked body.

His head throbbed with a dull ache and his throat was dry. An acid taste lingered at the back of his throat, residue from his vomiting the night before. He rolled out of bed and stumbled across the room towards the sink where he ran himself a glass of water. He swallowed it in four large gulps and then drank another with two ibuprofen tablets.

After a bath in which he'd scrubbed himself clean with brutal vigour, he felt an unaccountable craving for a cigarette. He'd not smoked for three years and had always mentally beaten down any stray thoughts to re-indulge. The craving seemed to have resurfaced as a consequence of the tension he felt running through his body. His hands were shaking and he wanted the disengaged relief that nicotine provided.

Last night had profoundly disturbed Gilman. He'd been on alcohol benders before, but hardly one in which he was reduced to an amnesiac wreck outside his own doorway, doodling numbers on walls. No, the amount of

alcohol he’d drunk could not explain the blank period between the TV station and finding himself outside the doorway to his own building.

The urge to smoke was put to the back of his mind and he went over to the window peering out onto the rain-washed Archway Road below. Droplets dribbled down the pane, catching little stars of broken light, as the endless stream of traffic hurtled past. And Gilman thought of how like beetles they were; scuttling in and out of a gigantic nest, swarming all over the length of Britain, past all obstacles in their path.

He sat down in the easy chair and looked at his watch. It was coming up to noon. He wanted to work on his novel and flicking through his notebook he had the notion of calling it Insanity Laughs. The thing made no sense, and it seemed appropriate. He’d glued in the notebook all the beer mats with scrawls on the reverse, the stray bits of paper, the underground tickets riddled with tiny writing, in fact anything and everything of an imaginative nature he’d composed after his second book.

He got up out of his seat with the notebook in his hand and went back to the window. This time as he stood there he had the impression that it was not his own reflection he saw but the scarred face of Stymm that stared back at him. Gilman closed his eyes and then opened them again.

Ж

After he’d eaten a cheese and tomato sandwich for his lunch, he made his way into the centre of town to drink. He caught the bus down Archway Road to the Underground Station.

Of all the means of travelling around London it was the tube that was the most spectral. The descent into the depths of the earth down the escalators, and then walking along the tiled and arc-lit passageways, filled him with a palpable sense of pleasurable dread. It was better appreciated at night, without crowds, when every footfall and voice-echo suggested the presence of ghostly beings close by. The underground system housed all manner of lost souls: drunks and beggars, schizos and addicts who either slumped in corners beyond the reach of CCTV cameras or who rode the trains back and forth to the ends of the line, over and over again until the service closed down past midnight.

In fact, Gilman had the idea that from the hours between ten p.m. and one a.m., the dead formed the majority of passengers. He fancied that they stumbled around amidst drunken revellers returning home and were not noticed at all. Perhaps they even dragged away the tastier of the living from the last trains, hauling them away along the tracks into the darkness of the tunnels. There were, after all, so many missing persons in the city, and the hiding places down there were so varied. Abandoned stations such as British Museum, Aldwych, York Road, Down Street and South Kentish Town were perfect for ghouls. By day, the thought was absurd, and yet very late at night, travelling on the tube with a carriage full of drooling idiots, telling the living from the dead was not easy. And sometimes he caught a horrible look in the eyes of another person that appeared to indicate not incoherence but a malevolent design.

Gilman was reminded of the theories hinted at in the website of the anonymous devotee of some new occult science: of corpses animated by the vast amounts of leaking energy generated within London. Radio and television signals, satellite transmissions, mobile phones, fibre-optic cables, telephone wires and computer networks; all were to blame for the radiation. Gilman remembered Fritz Leiber’s terrifying warning; couched in the form of his masterpiece Our Lady of Darkness. He also thought of the grey trains

hurtling along the electrified tracks, their carriages spraypainted with mystical symbols designed to facilitate the return of the dead and which most dismissed as unsightly graffiti. And he had a vision of gigantic burrows beneath cemeteries and graveyards that connected with the tunnels of the Underground tube system and into sewers and subterranean conduits all across the city: a reverse urban palimpsest of darkness, a parody of the maze of streets above ground.

Still, right this moment it was early afternoon and of the few people there on the platform, none appeared to be a menace to him. He'd decided to make his way to the Sceptre Tavern in darkest Holborn. It was a weekday pub and with it being Friday would start to fill up with city workers after four p.m. Gilman's associates who met there were in a similar position to himself: idling away existence over their pints of beer and glasses of spirits. All had enough of an income to keep them from the clutches of a nine-to-five job and in booze. Friday afternoons and evenings at the Sceptre were a regular occurrence for the little crowd.

A blast of cool wind and a rumbling noise announced the arrival of a southbound Charing Cross branch train. He changed at Tottenham Court Road for the Central Line. On his journey, before the train reached Holborn, he leant forward close to the window so that he could see the half-hidden and dismal remains of the British Museum station platform. It was too dark to see if any ghouls lingered in the furthest depths.

Gilman left the train at Chancery Lane station and made his way to the exit leading east. After a minute or so he saw the archway with the sign, just before Holborn Circus. It was fixed on a Victorian street lamp that had been converted to run off electricity instead of gas, and bore the legend "The Olde Sceptre Tavern". An arrow on it pointed inside the archway to the alley beyond. The passageway was narrow and at the first turn one came across the tavern itself, a squat building with hanging flowers outside. Most

remarkably, there was a tree outside the building, though it must have long since stopped growing as no direct sunlight penetrated into this urban maze.

Turning left as he reached the place, Gilman passed alongside the tavern into another alleyway that housed the outside toilets and entered the saloon bar. This was a drinking hole that he'd discovered many years ago, during his one and only experience in a "normal" job; working as a junior legal clerk for a firm of solicitors whose chambers had been in Gray's Inn. Back then he had spent many drunken evenings here, being bought drinks by his elders as his own wages were so meagre.

As he swung open the door to the bar the smell of tobacco and beer welcomed him. One or two pinstriped clerks looked up and then returned to their papers. Just around the corner, under a low doorway, was a snuggery bearing the legend "Ye Closet" in which Gilman's crowd met. It was up to Derek Snape to get there first and reserve the little room for them by his presence.

Sure enough he was settled down already with his half-pint of stout, and apparently working away at a story. A cigarette hung from his mouth, bobbing up and down as he muttered to himself.

"Derek!" Gilman said. "Just arrived. Are you ready for another?"

"I'll stick with this for now," he replied, "got to pace myself you know."

The usual answer. Snape was terrified of getting really drunk, perhaps because he suffered from an incredibly weak bladder and dreaded being caught short. He was in his late 50s, completely bald and with a face like an upturned egg. Over the twenty years that Gilman had known him, Snape had worn the same pair of glasses with thick black NHS frames. The author of innumerable vignettes that had graced all manner of print magazines, Snape had penned a tidal wave of “postmodernist tales”. Nobody could interpret the stories’ meaning and a coherent narrative was secondary to his use of language. Snape had taken early retirement a few years ago and now relished every opportunity he could to get out of the house. He had a good pension, but seemed somewhat bewildered that he had not achieved the wider literary recognition he doubtless merited by having infused his fiction with contemporary cultural ideology. This bewilderment seemed contradictory, because he also professed to hold the view that the individual sense of self was an illusion.

Gilman stood at the bar and waved to Sandra, the barmaid whom he knew, and she sauntered over to him.

“Hi Ivan, how are you then?” she said in a vague conspiratorial manner, as if something had passed between them previously. If it had Gilman was unaware of it. Probably something he’d said towards the end of the last time he was in here, when the beer-goggles had taken over his judgement.

“Fine, fine, Sandra. Pint of Best please.”

She looked a little crestfallen at his matter-of-fact response. After his drink had been handed over he went back to the snuggery where Snape had put aside his notebook.

“Working on your latest opus?” Gilman said.

“No time to waste, Ivan, eh? The idea came to me on the way here while I was on the train up from Croydon: a single page vignette concerning a man who is addicted to playing with a Jack-in-the-Box. Until one day what he expects to see for the umpteenth time is not what he sees.”

“Sounds promising. Cheers,” Gilman said, draining half the pint in a series of gulps. He was thirstier than he’d realised.

Snape and Gilman sat and talked for a while about the former’s writing until a booming West Country voice at the bar indicated the arrival of Charles Penryn. Gilman got up and leaned around the doorway of the snuggery to see the bulky form of the self-proclaimed “Cornish Laureate”, with his concubine Melissa Chang in tow.

“I require,” said Penryn in the most pompous manner imaginable, “a pint of your finest stout and a large glass of rum and cokee-cola for my lady friend.”

Penryn then turned his back on Sandra and his piggy eyes scanned the room, spotting Gilman looking over at him.

“Ah, Ivan!! No need to hide yourself away. Sally forth! And let me replenish your tankard!”

Inwardly, Gilman groaned. He had secretly hoped that Penryn might not turn up, for his purpose in coming along was not to socialise with those he knew, but was for he and Melissa Chang to try and seduce some unsuspecting female before the night was out. Penryn was a notorious troilist. He considered it his infinite good fortune to have Chang as his lover, for her striking oriental looks aided Penryn immensely in his objectives. He himself was a bloated travesty of a man, like an orangutan in clothes and no sensible woman would go near him when sober. He would point out a young lady to Chang that he found attractive, see if she concurred and then leave it to her to initiate seduction. Their pattern was always the same: Chang suggested that the woman return with the two of them to a party at their home. Of course there was no party, but after certain chemical inducements had been administered, it scarcely mattered.

The more hesitant or unwilling was their chosen female, the more they seemed to relish the challenge. Anyone who understood their desires from the outset and was inclined to go along with them was swiftly abandoned. They claimed that the corruption of innocence was their especial delight: the younger the better.

Certainly Chang believed Penryn’s claim to be the greatest Cornish writer who ever lived. And Penryn was widely published. Though not as prolific as Snape, he had a dozen volumes to his credit. The curious thing was that he had written the same book over and over again, only changing the names of the characters. But since several different publishers had brought them out, no one took any notice. Unlike Snape, Penryn’s fiction was intelligible. It was a cross between the Marquis de Sade and JRR Tolkien: he depicted a fantasy world peopled by endlessly horny goblins and furry troglodytes. Perhaps the most depressing aspect to his oeuvre was his reliance on what he considered outrageous wit. Every paragraph had to have a pun, or an innuendo, or a doubleentendre. He was consumed by a manic desire to appear oh-so-amusing in the face of life's meaninglessness. What Gilman

thought about the man's fiction was simply this: Penryn's jokes were there to distract the reader from the vacuum at the heart of everything he'd written. Just as his troilism was not really about anyone else except himself. The pleasure he derived from it was the contemplation of his being in a situation with two women at once, both tending to his needs. Penryn himself was only ever the true object of Penryn's desire.

"You remember my delightful concubine Melissa, don't you Ivan?" said Penryn with a sideways wink at Chang, who smiled coldly. "Of course you do. I'm sure you envy me, eh? Still single? Bad luck for you, eh!!"

"Very funny Charles," Gilman replied. "As charming as ever."

"Be careful I don't kick your arse Gilman! Be careful there! Ah, Derek, how are youuuu?? Let's sit down and make discourse …"

Penryn hauled his ape-like body along the wall-bench behind the table, dragging Chang after him, until both were seated next to Snape.

Gilman sat opposite and began to drain the pint of Best that Penryn had just bought him. One good thing about the fat Cornish orang-utan was that he could not be described as mean. He was invariably first to the bar and assumed that it was his round even if he had bought the last one.

Perhaps it was to do with his wealth; enough inherited from his father (a property developer who had died in his sixties and left everything to his son) to not even consider keeping to a budget. Although Gilman did not like

the thought, it was always there at the back of his mind: these Friday afternoons and evenings were an excuse to sponge all the drinks that one could from Penryn.

Snape drew a cigarette for himself from his packet of Players and offered them around the table. Gilman hesitated for a moment but then declined. Penryn said no too, but asked Chang to fetch him a cigar. As she got up he passed her a twenty-pound note:

“Oh, and more drinks! Let us drink deeply!” he bellowed, a lock of greasy copper hair falling across his left eye.

Ж

At some point during the hours that followed, Gilman realised that the pub had filled up with office workers and that the time was gone six p.m. He felt a little light-headed, and was in such a state of relaxation that he no longer found Penryn annoying. In fact, as he looked across the table at the hairy ginger beast he realised that he was only one of those many comic turns that wander onto the stage during one’s life.

Unfortunately, this state of détente was to prove only a brief interlude. Amongst the crowd of office workers, Gilman had noticed a striking looking blonde in a pin-striped business suit. He had the impression that she had deliberately held his gaze on a few occasions but could have been mistaken. She was slim, in her late twenties and had the most piercing blue eyes.

Penryn had noticed the source of Gilman's distraction and whilst he was away relieving himself in the outside toilets, Penryn pointed out the woman to Melissa Chang.

Snape leant back in his seat and frowned at what was about to happen.

By the time Gilman had returned, the woman had been invited over to join them by Melissa, working under Penryn's directions. Two bottles of Moët Champagne in ice buckets now stood upon the table. Gilman thought for a moment that Penryn had noticed him looking over at the woman and had, for once, made an attempt to unselfishly assist his lonely friend. However, it was soon obvious that Penryn wished to have the woman for himself and that Gilman's own interest was a source of added piquancy for him. The great orang-utan leant towards the woman and fairly slobbered as he spoke:

"Forgive my forwardness, my dear, but I wonder if you'd care to join me in a glass of champagne? You see my latest opus has just been published to universal acclaim and I always feel that beauty is champagne's natural accompaniment!"

The woman, whose name was Kate Collins, looked at Penryn as if a Martian had just beamed into the room and addressed her. She glanced across the table at Gilman and in that split second something that needed no words flashed between them: whether it was the raising of an eyebrow, or the hint of total, mutual, incredulity in one another's facial expressions, it was enough. It was an understanding, a sense of being on the same wavelength.

Penryn, baffled for the time being, leant back and relied on Melissa to salvage the situation. Miss Chang knew better than to immediately pursue their quarry after the awful misreading that Penryn had made, and so regrouped, turning the conversation to matters that she hoped might place Collins in a more comfortable frame of mind.

Up to this point Collins and Gilman had not spoken to each other. He was watching her with increasing fascination. She appeared to have little inclination to return to the crowd she had been snatched away from and explained that they were her office colleagues and that she'd had enough of company politics for one day. Penryn refilled everyone's glasses as soon as they emptied and in a show of lavishness, and insisted that he must pay for all the drinks. Two more bottles of champagne were brought over by the landlord himself whom Penryn knew of old.

Snape proposed a toast to the success of Penryn's book and a little ripple of applause made its way around the table. Melissa had by now decided that the time was ripe to begin the game all over again and played with Kate Collins's blonde hair, curling little tresses of it around her index finger.

"Your hair, so lovely, so fresh," she muttered softly.

Drawing her head back a little to disengage herself from Melissa's touch, she looked at Gilman in particular and asked:

"So you're all writers?"

And then Gilman told her about his books and, amazingly, she had actually read his first book The Unsatisfied Thirst! Her view was not uncritical and she had opinions about it that Gilman found uncomfortable, but for the next twenty minutes they disengaged from the rest and huddled together in a private conversation. None of the others had bothered to read any of Gilman's writings and so were unable to contribute to the discussion, although Snape claimed to have got halfway through one of his short stories a year ago.

Penryn looked on with mounting frustration and Melissa had to resort to fondling him beneath the table in order to prevent him from leaping across and attacking Gilman.

Snape tried hard to interest Penryn by introducing the subject of Oulipo, but the only response he could elicit was a deadening grunt of displeasure.

Ж

When next Gilman looked at his watch it was nearly closing time. His tongue felt thick in his mouth and he was conscious of the fact that he was quite drunk. At some point the conversation had broadened out again and now Penryn held forth imperiously, talking about his politics, insisting that he was Cornwall's spiritual locus. He was even revelling in his total contempt for the mongrel English, against whom he said the united Celtic nations would one day rise up, and then exterminate for their own good. Except for the Englishwomen, he said, who would form breeding stock for the victorious Celtic armies. Undoubtedly, some of this was tongue in cheek, but there was a horrible fascist gleam in his eyes nevertheless.

Gilman was sick of Penryn. He was thoroughly disgusted by this orange gibbon that drivelled and spat out venom. Even Kate Collins seemed to have fallen under his spell. She sat and listened to Penryn, in what appeared to be a state of rapt attention. Now when Melissa played with Collins' hair, curling it around her finger, she made no attempt to pull away.

You wanted her for yourself, Gilman thought, there's no difference between you and Penryn really. Except that he's honest about it and you're not.

He sat there draining his glass and felt bitterness creep over him.

What you hate in Penryn is what you hate in yourself.

Snape was hunched over the table. He had fallen asleep and begun to snore in a drunken stupor. The landlord called for last orders and the harsh clang of the final bell pealed out.

"Gilman…surely you're not wasted? Ah, the English pansy!" Penryn sneered.

It was pathetic but Gilman rose to the bait.

"Absinthe time," he said. "Maximum wormwood. Are you up for it?"

Penryn’s glistening eyes filled with delight. A broad grin spread over his features. He knew that Gilman was riled now.

“Indubitably,” replied Penryn, as he winked at Kate Collins. Melissa Chang had begun to whisper into Collins’ ear and, unless Gilman was mistaken, gently flicked her tongue around the edge of the earlobe.

After a few minutes Gilman returned with two glasses and a dusty bottle paid for on Penryn's bar-tab.

The old ritual proceeded, emerald to an opal.

And then they drank.

At first it went well for Gilman. He had consumed three glasses. But as the last mouthful hit his stomach he felt the gorge rising. Acid forced itself into his throat.

Gilman was going to throw up. Without saying a word, he leapt up from his seat and dived for the exit, trying to make the outside gents’ toilets before the contents of his gut were expelled. He was relieved to have made it beyond the outside door and into the alleyway before he vomited. Gilman doubled up and puked again and again.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to find Snape, now awakened, Penryn and Chang, gazing out of the snuggery window and laughing and pointing at him. The hand on his shoulder belonged to Kate Collins.

“Come on, get up,” she said. “I think you’ve had enough. Time to go.”

She put her hand underneath his arm and led him along the alleyway.

“We’ll find you a taxi,” she said. “There are plenty along High Holborn.”

Ж

Now the peculiar thing was that, rather than returning to the Sceptre to finish her drink with Snape, Penryn and Chang, Kate Collins elected instead to travel north with Gilman in the taxi she’d hailed for him.

And as she sat there in the taxi, speeding through the neon wonderland that is London late at night, she felt protective towards this crumpled and distressed man who, very, very tentatively, had slipped his hand into hers.

Ж

By the time they'd arrived outside Gilman's flat on Archway Road, he'd managed to sober up a little and marvel at the spectacle of the attractive young lady alongside him.

"Coffee would be nice," she said. And that was that.

The taxi driver even gave him a little nod of good-natured envy as Gilman handed over the fare.

The sight of his scrawling from the night before momentarily unsettled him. A series of unintelligible characters had been written over and over again on the white paint of the porch walls, in spirals and whorls. If Kate noticed it, she said nothing. Despite fumbling with the keys and the two locks on the entrance door, Gilman managed to locate the normally troublesome light switch in the hall with no difficulty. He led the way up the stairs but as they reached the first floor landing Gilman was completely taken aback by the sight of Stymm standing there clutching a bottle of whisky. The scarred little man was dressed in a grey sweatshirt and jogging bottoms. His empty eyes glistened with forced bonhomie and his mouth was twisted into what might only just be described as a smile.

"Ivan! I thought I heard you come in. I wondered if you and your friend might enjoy a night-cap," he said.

Gilman had no idea how he'd found out what his first name was. And why this completely unexpected attempt at obtrusive neighbourliness? Had he been watching from the window overlooking the road and seen their arrival?

He looked back at Kate, but her face betrayed no indication of what her feelings were. Gilman didn't want the drink; then again he didn't want to appear ungrateful and eager simply to get her back to his flat. In the end he decided that the best course of action was to say:

"That'd be nice. Only one though. OK with you, Kate?"

She seemed to nod at nothing in particular and they went into Stymm's flat.

Ж

The next thing he knew it was pitch black and he was lying face down on a carpeted floor. He felt as if he'd fallen asleep at that spot and, crawling up onto his knees, he began to fumble around. It seemed that he was in a corridor and when he finally found the lightswitch and could see his surroundings he discovered that he was on the first floor landing outside Stymm's flat. His watch showed that it was four a.m.

Gilman had no idea what had taken place. His last recollection was of entering the flat with Kate. After that a total blank. He tried desperately to piece together what had happened. Had he drunk too much and passed out after leaving Stymm's flat? Had Kate left before him? Had she been seduced by Stymm? No answers to any of the questions.

Could he knock at Stymm’s door at this time of the morning? Wouldn’t he look incredibly stupid? What if the two of them were in there together, laughing at him?

One thing was sure: he could not make sense of things tonight. The best thing to do was to go up to his own flat and hope that sleep might restore his memories. He couldn’t stomach the thought of making a fuss right now. What he thought he wanted more than anything else at that moment was a cigarette.

“Ye Closet” snuggery

CHAPTER FOUR

GILMAN HAD DRIFTED off to sleep for a few hours, but it had been neither deep nor refreshing. He lay in bed thinking about last night and wondering what had happened to Kate. However, the details were becoming sketchy as the time between now and then lengthened. He was not even now sure that she had returned with him, and if she had, whether she'd gone into Stymm's flat through her own choice, leaving the vomit-flecked Gilman to crawl up the stairs to his own flat and sleep off his inebriation.

Whatever the truth of the matter, he felt that he had taken a wrong turn, and wanted to make things right. If she had gone off with Stymm (and she appeared to have done so) then that was well and good. After all, he had work to do. Work that he had too long put off. He didn't need distractions anyway. Gilman needed restore some self-esteem and to do so he had to get back to working on his novel.

Around an hour after he'd crawled out of bed, he sat in front of the computer with a mug of black coffee and more of the same in reserve on the hot plate. His notebook was open in his lap, the myriad of paper fragments pasted in like a collage. He'd made the effort to number the scraps so that he could move from one to another sequentially. Yet it turned out that the numbers, rather than being linked by a narrative, were really more closely linked in terms of subject matter. He would have to impose the structure of the novel from scratch. What he actually needed before starting work was to index the ideas in the notebook so that they could be drawn upon and used in the proper sequence. Unlike his last novel, Terminal Cases, he had no desire to utilise a loose stream-ofconsciousness technique. Perhaps the narrative might not be linear; but certainly it would not be entirely random.

So he switched off the computer, went and sat in his armchair and began to draw up the index in a second, brand-new notebook. It was a laborious task, as he noticed that a number of his pasted fragments referred to the same ideas, and flicking back and forth through them he found that the original number sequence only followed one path: branches off from it were withered and desultory. Unless Gilman was careful in his work, he would require a cross-referenced catalogue of the very index he was creating.

But he found the effort rewarding and the hours passed quickly, until he had covered several pages of the second notebook with references to the ideas contained in the first. It had not proved possible to confine the index solely to instances in which the ideas appeared in the pasted fragments. He needed to add footnotes to the entries in order to elaborate those instances where a thought had not been taken to its logical conclusion.

It was dark by the time Gilman halted his activities. The streetlights had come on and for some minutes he had relied on the sickly orange glow from outside to see what he had been writing down. He was pleased with the day’s work and the fact that he’d actually managed to grind it out without succumbing to the distractions of booze. Indeed, he felt so self-satisfied that his concern for Kate Collins, and sense of disappointment at her apparent flight, now seemed of quite secondary importance.

Ж

Over the next couple of days Gilman kept to his work. He only ventured out to pick up food and coffee, which he was drinking in vast quantities. He’d even bought a packet of cigarettes on impulse and left them atop his

computer screen, still wrapped in plastic. They would be his reward once Insanity Laughs was finished, he told himself.

Unfortunately, the footnotes and marginalia were taking more time than he expected, and the prospect of having to create that second catalogue loomed larger than before. Not that this disheartened Gilman in any way, for he was enjoying the immersion into the novel's ideas and scheme. And should its complexity require a great deal more preparation than his other books; well, this was a good sign. No detail would be overlooked, no discrepancies appear, no avenue remain unexplored.

Then, on the third afternoon, Gilman's entry phone buzzed insistently. At first he ignored it, but the noise went on for at least ten minutes. It had proved ruinous to his concentration and Gilman angrily snatched the receiver from its cradle:

"Yes, what do you want?"

"Are you Ivan Gilman?" said a menacing voice above the background noise of the traffic on the Archway Road.

"Who's asking?"

"My name's Paul Helm. I'm a friend of Kate's. I want to talk to you. She's not been seen since Friday when you got in a taxi with her. Let me in."

“I don’t know what happened to her. Ask my neighbour. Buzz him. He saw her last. Now leave me alone.”

Gilman had no desire to meet the owner of that menacing voice face to face.

“You bastard, open this fucking door and let me in or I’ll get the police on to …”

Gilman replaced the handset in its cradle. The entry phone started buzzing again instantly and he took it off the hook, leaving the tinny disembodied voice hanging in mid air.

He sat down and wondered whether Stymm and Kate had hit it off to the extent that they had run away together. Women often had a strange taste in men. But surely, Gilman thought, it would take a very peculiar taste indeed: Stymm was scarred around the eyes and forehead, the perfect weight and height for a jockey, and his attitude was one of sneering discontent at the world. There were no signs that he was rich; not that Kate appeared to be the sort of woman interested in gold digging. She’d certainly seen right through Charles Penryn. Anyway, it was none of his business now.

Ж

Just how many days later the police themselves arrived to speak to Gilman, he was not sure. He’d lost track of time. He spent countless hours compiling information from websites in his notebooks. The floor of his studio flat was

covered in little piles of scribbled bits of paper, all of which had to be filtered for probable collation into marginalia, footnotes and appendices.

Gilman was on his hands and knees amongst the pages, carefully prioritising them, when his entry phone began to buzz persistently. As before he tried to ignore it, for he had no wish to communicate yet again with the owner of the menacing voice with whom he'd recently spoken. But instead of stopping, the buzzing became incessant. Someone was keeping a finger on the button in the porch downstairs until a response was given.

Intending to simply take the receiver off the hook once more, Gilman was stopped short as he lifted it, for he caught the words:

"…is the police, Mr Gilman. Open the door."

He put the handset to his ear.

"Unless you talk to us now Mr Gilman we'll have to take you to the station. I'm sure this can be cleared up very quickly if you'll just be cooperative."

Gilman ran his hands through his thinning, lank hair and found it was dripping with sweat.

"I'll be there in a moment," he whispered into the mouthpiece.

Looking down at his clothes, Gilman was concerned that he was dressed in the same pyjamas and dressing gown that he'd been wearing since beginning work again on Insanity Laughs. Since the curtains were drawn, he was not sure whether it was morning, afternoon or evening. He didn't want to appear odd in front of the police. So he darted over to the window and pulled back the curtains. It looked to be mid-morning, so he could claim to be a late riser. In fact, he could even use that as an excuse for his delay in responding to their ringing.

Gilman staggered down the stairs in his carpet slippers, reached the long hallway at the bottom and then peered through the spy-hole in the front door. It was no trick, at least. There were two police officers in uniform standing in the porch; one male and the other female. They looked disgruntled at having been kept waiting for so long.

He opened the door and let them both into the hall. They looked at Gilman with ill-disguised suspicion and he nervously ran his hands across several days growth of beard he'd not shaved off.

"We're here about Kate Collins," the male officer said, opening a little notebook and licking the tip of a pencil. "We understand that you were with her on the night of her disappearance: the third of November. Perhaps you'd just like to confirm that for us, sir."

His female colleague was looking around the hallway and was understandably not impressed by the hall's cheap grey carpet and grubby walls. A large collection of unsorted mail and takeaway flyers had gathered on the floor.

Gilman sat on the stairs and told the officer everything he could remember, right up to the point where he'd awoken on the first floor landing after the two of them had run into Stymm.

"And this neighbour of yours, sir. What's his name?" the constable enquired.

"He said his name's Mr. Stymm," Gilman responded.

"Not a friend then, sir?" the lady constable added, her chubby face looking up from the post that she was flicking through.

"Just a neighbour, that's all," Gilman said.

"Well, there's no post for him here. Whoever he is, he seems to collect his mail. There's nothing for Flat A here. This is all yours, for Flat B," she said, handing Gilman the thick wedge of envelopes that she'd sorted.

"Well then, this Mr … Stymm. Do you think he might be in now, sir? It would save time if we could speak to him."

The constable had folded his notebook and put it back in the top pocket of his uniform.

Although Gilman had no idea whether Stymm was in or not, he led the two police officers up the stairs to the first floor landing, where they passed along the short corridor and knocked at Flat A's door. Almost immediately it opened and the horrible little man stood there, attired immaculately in a crisp black shirt and slacks. It looked almost as if he were expecting his visitors and had dressed especially for them. His scarred face twisted as it formed the semblance of a grin. If they were taken aback at the sight of him, they showed no sign of it and calmly entered his apartment.

With the door closed behind them, Gilman was left stranded in the corridor and not sure what to do. Should he stay there until they emerged? He felt the need to pop back to his own flat and change into some suitable clothes, but wondered if he'd have time. The last thing he wanted was for the officers to come in search of him and discover the domestic chaos in which he lived. They'd really mark him down as a weirdo then: the floor covered with his notes and research documents that he'd printed from the internet.

So he waited there. He was very tempted to creep along the corridor, press his ear to the wood and find out whether he could hear what was going on. But around five minutes later the two constables appeared again.

They nodded at Gilman as they passed, without saying a word.

"What, that's it? He told you all you needed to know?" Gilman asked.

"We're quite satisfied, sir. Thank you. You've been most cooperative," the male officer said.

Just as they reached the front door Gilman heard him call out:

“You might want to get this graffiti in the porch cleared up, sir. Someone’s scrawled all over the wall.”

And that was that.

Ж

It was only by chance that Gilman found out what had happened. Two days after the police had questioned him, he’d gone to the convenience store underneath his flat to replenish his supplies of coffee. At the counter the young Indian shop assistant had the local newspaper open, and on one of the pages was a photograph of Kate Collins below the headline

MYSTERY OF WOMAN’S MANGLED BODY IN HIGHGATE WOODS

Gilman bought a copy of the newspaper and read the article back in his flat, sipping nervously at the piping hot coffee, hardly noticing how it scolded his lips and tongue. He could hardly bear to look at Kate’s face staring up at him from the photograph and folded the page so that just the report was visible.

A jogger had discovered Kate’s corpse two days ago. It was half covered by leaf mould and soil, and the man had tripped over it whilst running off the beaten track. Her remains had been clumsily concealed close to a mound. However, what was remarkable about the body was the cause of death. The injuries sustained were consistent with a fall from a great height: massive internal ruptures and bleeding, as well as multiple fractures. All the evidence indicated that she had fallen from a height of around seventy feet straight onto a concrete surface. Someone had taken the corpse into the woods for their own purposes. Even more macabre was the ritualistic abuse enacted on the cadaver. Bizarre occult symbols had been carved into its flesh.

An ex-boyfriend who had been stalking Kate since they’d split up two months ago was charged with her murder: his name was Paul Helm.

Almost absent-mindedly, Gilman realised that he’d opened the packet of cigarettes he kept on top of the computer and was now greedily sucking smoke into his lungs. The nicotine hit his brain and he felt dizzy and light-headed. It didn’t stop his hands shaking uncontrollably. They had done so since he’d first glanced at the article.

CHAPTER FIVE

WORK ON HIS novel suffered. All the various convolutions that its preparation required were pushed to the back of Gilman's mind. Though he was confident that his indices would enable him to pick up the threads again when he was ready, Kate Collins' murder and the possibility that Stymm had been somehow involved took precedence.

Gilman believed that Stymm was exerting a monstrous influence over his life, for some unknown purpose. And so he took to watching his neighbour closely, monitoring his movements: noting what times Stymm left the building and when he returned. He was easily observed from the landing on Gilman's floor and could be seen through the banisters making his way down the stairs, clad in that habitual raincoat and carrying his black leather bag. His movements seemed to be confined to the night hours, and Gilman had the fantastical idea that the diminutive man might be a phantom. There was something unearthly about him; it was true. And Gilman could make no sense of the way the two police officers had so quickly dismissed him from their enquiries. They'd acted as if under a spell after seeing Stymm, half-awake, docile, mesmerised. Ah, but it made no sense. And Kate Collins' body had not been discovered after having died of fright: it was all broken up. No, Stymm was no ghost. But Gilman would have given much to see the symbols carved into Kate Collins' flesh. He was desperate to learn if they resembled those he'd discovered, or thought he'd discovered, in the TV studio.

The tedium of his vigils was somewhat relieved by the guilty pleasure he felt in having started smoking again. As he sat on the floor of the landing, peering down the stairs, he measured the time in twentyminute intervals

between one cigarette being consumed and the next being lit. He drank from a bottle of whisky, and often, when he'd consumed enough to provide Dutch courage, would creep down the stairs to the door of Stymm's apartment, peering through the keyhole and trying to hear what was going on within. With enough booze inside his stomach, he was able to convince himself that this was not a dangerous practice. Although Gilman had no idea what Stymm might do if he found that he was being spied upon, Gilman was confident that he would not leave the flat other than at his invariable times. Indeed, Gilman suspected that these times corresponded to some pattern or ritual and hoped to eventually find a correlation such as in the rising and setting of the moon and the ebb and flow of the tides.

Looking through the keyhole had been fruitless. All Gilman had seen was the sickly yellow wallpaper on the far side of the room. That there appeared to be no furniture in the place struck him as odd; though he admitted to himself that it was possible there was some on either side of the keyhole's limited line of vision.

But even if he saw nothing, he certainly heard something. Stymm kept up a hideous monologue, thinking out loud: reasoning himself into madness. The voice coming from the room with the peeling wallpaper filled Gilman with horror, but he felt an equal sense of fascination. Never had he felt so utterly alone as when he crouched in the darkness of that small corridor, and the voice filtered through the door. The sentences it spoke were disjointed and yet their subject matter was consistent: a lament to being confined, trapped or imprisoned, the fear of confusion and disorientation. But there were also monstrous intimations of a mind lost in tormented solipsism, of a being capable of committing the most amoral acts in revenge for the disappointment it had suffered.

Gilman's anonymous call to the police on the matter elicited no action. He was firmly told that the case was closed, that Paul Helm was about to be

tried for the murder of Kate Collins and that was the end of the matter.

Ж

Gilman wondered what the Sceptre Tavern crowd had made of all this. Part of him even questioned how far back events might have been controlled. Had his meeting with Kate been entirely a coincidence? Did the Sceptre crowd play any part in a conspiracy by Stymm?

This time he was the last to arrive. They were all sat there in the “Ye Closet” snuggery of the Sceptre.

Gilman hung around at the bar for a little while, knocking back a couple of whiskys, out of their sight. He’d done the rounds of quite a few pubs before arriving here and lost track of where most of the afternoon had gone. It was past five, and the conspiracy theories had been carefully growing in his alcohol-fuelled brain. He cast a sly look over at Penryn, Chang and Snape, none of whom had spotted him yet. Gilman sniggered into his glass and drained it. He lent back onto the bar, drew a packet of tobacco from his pocket and began to hand-roll himself a cigarette. Funny how that skill had not deserted him. It had been three years since he’d last done this, but it might have been a mere three minutes.

He had no doubt that they were deeply engaged in conversation about him by now. The business with Kate Collins was being examined from every angle, with Penryn relishing the fact that he, Gilman, had been implicated in her murder. Now was the time for him to confront them all. He knew that they’d have been falling over each other to send both Paul Helm and then

the police in his direction. But he had to be careful; he had to be clever and not show all his cards in one go …

Penryn caught sight of Gilman first. To the bloated Cornishman's trained eye it was at once apparent that Gilman was already pretty drunk. His thin legs wobbled a little as he weaved through the crowd separating them, heading for the snuggery. A hand-rolled cigarette drooped from his lower lip. Penryn whispered to the others:

"Heads up, here comes the man himself. Batten down the hatches, eh, eh."

Then he got to his feet, raising his pint as if in salutation.

"Ivan! I wondered where you'd got to! Hail! My good fellow! Let me inebriate you further. What'll it be?"

Snape waved limply at Gilman, patches of oily sweat drooling across his egg-like pate. Melissa Chang narrowed her eyes and could not resist a knowing smile. She would have found Gilman more interesting had he been capable of murder. Violence was what she worshipped.

"No, let me get these in. I insist."

Gilman deliberately slurred the last word in this sentence so that "insist" came out as "inshist". His unsteadiness on his feet was also feigned. He

reached over the table to the ashtray and stubbed out the cigarette that hung from his lip.

“What’ll it be?”

And after protests from Penryn, Gilman got his way.

As he headed back to the bar to collect the round, he looked over his shoulder to see the three of them in a huddle. Obviously in his absence they were having another little conference about him.

Ж

During the first couple of drinks, the conversation stuck to small talk: the usual updates on literary works in progress and recent sales or new markets. Chang had relaxed to the extent that she was already scanning the evening crowd in the Sceptre for possible conquests. Penryn, meanwhile, was thoroughly enjoying himself. He ran his curiously stumpy fingers through the furry ginger hair on his scalp, like a preening ape. He was drunk on beer and his own ego-trip.

“… already, my agent advises me,” he boomed, as if the entire pub wanted to hear him, “my new novel has been optioned by Hollywood! I have no doubt that what Henry James termed the ‘pattern in the carpet’ will finally become apparent to my critics after this, the fourteenth in the series.”

He was waving his pint from side to side in the air like a demented orange-haired Viking. Even Chang looked discomforted by his behaviour.

“Oh yes,” gibbered Snape, weakly, “A toast to … errm … um ...”

And he quickly sipped at his half-pint of best bitter.

“My magnificence,” Penryn said.

It appeared that nothing could spoil Charles Penryn’s state of ecstasy. A broad, self-satisfied sense of immense well-being oozed from his every pore. But then a sudden dark look crossed his face and he said:

“Why didn’t you toast me, Ivan, you wretch? Have a care; lest I kick your arse! You sad little failure … ha … ha …”

The bonhomie had frosted over.

“You put the police onto me, I suppose?” Gilman said.

“No,” said Chang, who was waiting for the subject to finally surface. “Charles told them nothing. He has his own ridiculous code of honour.

When the police came here to the Sceptre asking about Kate Collins, I told them all about your having left with the woman."

"That's right. Why, were I in your shoes, I'd be glad old boy. Yes, GLAD I say! There's no such thing as bad publicity for a writer," Penryn added with a smirk.

Snape's eyes were darting left and right during this exchange, as if he were incapable of forming his own opinion on the matter. His head nodded and shook incoherently.

"And no doubt you also told them that when I left, I was more of a danger to myself than anyone else?" Gilman said, now looking straight at Chang, and ignoring Penryn entirely: he was finally coming to realise that she was the real brains behind their double-act.

"Men can do a lot of unexpected things, especially when off their heads on booze. How do I know?" Chang replied.

Gilman was looking at her with hatred in his narrowed eyes.

Penryn lent forward menacingly across the table. He wagged a stumpy finger entwined with ginger hairs at Gilman.

“Now listen here Ivan: any more of this annoying my delicious Melissa and I’ll beat you to a pulp.”

“Shut the fuck up, Charles,” Chang hissed.

Suddenly everything slowed down, as if time itself were grinding to a halt.

Those words cut through the air like a chill wind. And people turned to see who had uttered them with such vehemence.

It was at that moment Gilman thought he’d lost his mind completely.

For instead of looking at Chang, everyone in the Sceptre Tavern was looking straight at him. The crowd stared madly with totally white eyes and each face bore a distorted grin whose exact meaning Gilman could not interpret. There was a deathly stillness: as if a video playback had ended unexpectedly in a deranged tableau.

He turned back to the table and saw that Snape, Penryn and Chang were all staring madly at him too. Their distorted grins had some sinister element he was sure – and Gilman felt that his theory concerning a mass conspiracy against him was now finally vindicated.

As quickly as motion had halted, it started up again; and the crowd turned away, the sound of their buzzing conversation again filling the air.

“You’re all Stymm’s spies. I knew it,” Gilman said to Chang, casting his accusing gaze around to take in Penryn and Snape as well.

“What are you talking about? Who’s Stymm?” Chang said.

“I’ve found out what I need to know. You won’t see me again,” Gilman said and got to his feet, slipping into his long black overcoat. He picked up the remains of his pint and drained the glass before he left.

“No absinthe, then,” The Cornishman grumbled.

The remaining three said nothing for a time.

Eventually Penryn had spotted a young female punk dressed all in leather at the bar. He nudged Chang who smiled in approval and nodded. Ж

Out in the streets around High Holborn the sky was dark; a mixture of low grey and sodium orange. Gilman looked east. To his right were the tottering Tudor buildings that had lasted for hundreds of years and which had sunk into the ground as if age had wearied them. A row of modern telephone boxes, one of which was also an internet booth, stood on the pavement opposite.

In Gilman’s disordered, drunken state he became suddenly terrified of everybody around him. After all, it was now night, and if the dead knew that he was beginning to suspect the truth about widespread reanimation, what danger might he be in? Was it the case the people in the Sceptre were already living corpses; their true nature revealed in that horrific tableau? Would they spill onto the streets at any second and drag him down in a clammy death-embrace?

What was he to do now? It was inconceivable that he could catch the tube back to Archway at this time of night. Travelling underground would be the least safe method of transport. The tunnels and trains were full of the risen dead. He could catch a bus, but was afraid that if the vehicle were under the control of the dead he might be taken all the way to an abandoned depot, and to some monstrous fate.

Walking would be safest. Not everyone on the streets had gone over to the other side.

He fumbled around in his pockets and pulled out his pouch of tobacco. The wind had picked up and Gilman decided to shelter from it in the telephone/internet booth. He could roll his cigarette in there, and quickly consult the psychometropolitan website whilst he smoked.

Once the machine swallowed up his money, Gilman keyed in the URL of the site, which he knew off by heart. There was the usual front page, with its listing of new image uploads from places of urban desolation, and Gilman scrolled down until he reached the central London “safe passage” routes. He clicked on the icon, but immediately an error message came up, indicating that there was a problem with the server.

Gilman cursed, and was tempted to stub out his cigarette on the screen in frustration. Instead, he hit the side of the monitor hard with the flat of his hand and it shut down completely.

He looked around wildly through the glass panels. Was it his imagination, or did the traffic slow down as it passed him? He imagined beady eyes watching his movements and relaying them back to headquarters from radio transmitters in the cars.

It was unsafe to stay outdoors in one place for any length of time. Gilman left the telephone box and pulled up the long collar of his long black overcoat to obscure his face as he made his way home.

CHAPTER SIX

FIVE DAYS LATER, Gilman decided to temporarily suspend work on his novel.

He had not dared venture out during this period, only making the short trip downstairs to the grocery store for food, coffee and cigarettes. His old habit returned with a vengeance, for he was now virtually chainsmoking. Had he himself not now become used to it, he might have noticed that the smell of tobacco smoke had soaked into his clothes and every corner of the studio flat.

It was impossible to work on his novel Insanity Laughs due to the assault gathering against him. His mind would no longer operate along the lines required for him to prepare a coherent piece of long fiction. Moreover, much of his time was now spent on the landing, observing the activities of Stymm.

So Gilman carefully packed away his notes into a folder that he then put in a plastic bag. He intended to deposit it in a little box room he'd discovered just above the WC. This room was reached by climbing onto the toilet and then up to a ledge and through a small set of double doors. It was a good hiding place. Should the dead finally catch up with him, he did not want his manuscript to be easily found by them.

The box room space was filled with a surprising amount of debris, and whilst putting away the folder there, Gilman noticed a shape covered by a sheet. Underneath it was an old portable television set.

Gilman had a nearly pathological hatred of television. He believed that it was a drug (albeit of an electronic rather than pharmaceutical nature) more addictive than heroin. There was something damnably hypnotic about its influence. He had often warned television watchers about the way that time passed without one realising it, whilst the machine's cathode rays bored into the fragile tissue of the human brain, rotting it away. There are studies conclusively demonstrating that television is the most effective form of mass subjugation ever devised. Where television is readily available to all members of a society, voyeurism rapidly becomes the dominant creed of that society.

Slipping the cigarette from his mouth, Gilman took hold of the TV set with both hands and lowered it to the ledge. He followed it down, and then hopped onto the toilet seat, carrying the set down onto his chest and stepping to the carpet. He retrieved his cigarette and drew on it a few times to get it smouldering away again nicely. Then he put the TV on the kitchen area table. The thing was probably broken anyway. So why was he standing there, thinking about seeing if it worked? Could it be that he had experienced so little contact with the wider world these past few weeks that he wanted to be reassured that it went on just as idiotically as before?

An aerial, a circular loop of metal, was built into the back of the device; so at least reception should not be a problem. Anyway the studio flat was quite a way up the hill. Transmissions, Gilman assumed, came from Alexandra Palace: hardly a great distance from here. He plugged it in and turned a knob marked "ON/OFF".

There was a sudden burst of crackling from the set and its screen was filled with black and white static.

That was it. There was nothing else to be seen.

Gilman leant forward to examine the front of the TV more carefully.

There was a large UHF dial, which he began to rotate first clockwise and then counter-clockwise.

And a single channel finally appeared on the screen through the static.

Ж

Gilman sat cross-legged on the floor in the darkness watching the incredible broadcast unfold and was oblivious to everything else. He smoked incessantly; the blue whorls and ripples of tobacco vapour drifting across the screen’s light.

It was an emergency network and not regular programming at all. No other channels could be received by the set, despite Gilman’s tuning all the way

through the UHF frequencies. For the first ten minutes, there was only a test pattern being broadcast from a single camera in a TV studio. A right to left scrolling announcement at the bottom of the picture declared:

A STATE OF EMERGENCY HAS BEEN DECLARED. WAIT FOR THE NEXT BROADCAST.

Finally there was the sound of shuffling from behind the camera. It was turned sharply to the right, away from the test card upon which it had been trained. There was a momentary glimpse of the desolate studio, and Gilman was astonished to recognise it as the same place that he'd visited. The sigils on the walls were just visible. The rest of the interior was now full of functioning equipment. Then the back of a man came into view. He was clad in a baggy suit of very dark material and his patchy grey hair only partially obscured a mottled scalp.

The broadcaster's breathing was asthmatic. It rose and fell with a horrible wheezing as he rounded the desk and turned to face the camera.

The transmission was of extremely low quality, like a relic of the nineteen-fifties: blurred, half in focus and noticeably distorted. Gilman would have believed that it had come from the dark side of the moon.

And when Gilman finally saw that face, he scrambled backwards across the floor.

It was dead: the skin white as chalk. The thing's mouth was paralytic on one side, and a quarter of its face (around the temple and ear) was missing. Its enormous eyes were sunk back into the shadows of the sockets and were glassy, flat and totally white. They never blinked.

And then it spoke in a hollow monotone whilst consulting papers in a folder:

" THE LATEST REPORT WE HAVE IS THAT… CONSCIOUSNESS IS RETURNING AND THE TRANSFER IS PROVING SUCCESSFUL…WE HAVE THE NUMBERS TO SUCCEED …

BELOW GROUND AND AT NIGHT THE CITY IS OURS … AFTER SUNSET WE HAVE CONTROL OVER ALL FORMS OF TRANSPORT ABOVE AND BELOW GROUND … OUR DREAM-SCIENTISTS WILL SOON SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF IMMOBILITY IN DAYLIGHT … EXPERIMENTS UPON FRESHLY LIBERATED HUMAN SUBJECTS HAVE ALREADY BEGUN … SIGILS UPON THE FLESH EXPEDITE POST-MORTEM REALISATION …

NECROMORPHIC CENTRAL CONTROL CONFIRM THAT THE INFESTATION OF ALIENS IN THIS BORDERLAND OF REALITY SHOULD BE CLEARED BY 104/ALPHA TIME …

REMEMBER THAT THE ALIENS ARE NOT A PHYSICAL DANGER TO US. THEY CAN NO MORE HARM US THAN CAN A THOUGHT … MANY OF THEM ARE SIMPLY DREAM-PROJECTIONS OF FELLOW NECROMORPHS STILL IN A STATE OF TRANSITION … MANY ARE

ONLY EXTRAS … DESTRUCTION OF THE ALIENS IS LIBERATION NOT OBLIVION…

UNLESS THIS BORDERLAND IS QUICKLY OCCUPIED IT WILL BE LOST TO US … EMBARKATION TO ANOTHER SECTOR IS NOT POSSIBLE …

REMEMBER THAT DISORIENTATION QUICKLY PASSES AND THAT YOU WILL RAPIDLY BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO FUNCTIONING IN THIS BORDER REGION … ALIENS WILL NOT BE ABLE SEE YOUR TRUE APPEARANCE UNLESS IN A STATE OF ACUTE SENSORY DERANGEMENT …

FOR EACH ALIEN DISPLACED FROM THIS SECTOR; ONE OF OUR OWN PEOPLE CAN COME THROUGH …

THE ALIENS ARE IMAGINARY. THEY ARE DREAMED INTO EXISTENCE FROM THE OTHER SIDE.

I REPEAT: THE ALIENS ARE IMAGINARY: BUT THEY CANNOT SIMPLY BE DREAMED OUT OF EXISTENCE IN THIS SECTOR.

THEIR CONTINUED PERSISTENCE IN THIS BORDER REGION MEANS OUR ANNIHILATION … THEIR MEMORIES ARE MANUFACTURED AND THIS ENTIRE SECTOR HAS EXISTED FOR LESS THAN A YEAR … THEY MUST NOT BE ALLOWED TO ACHIEVE INDEPENDENT EXISTENCE …

CONSEQUENTLY, THE ALIENS MUST BE EXTERMINATED.

THESE BEINGS ARE A THREAT TO OUR VERY SURVIVAL.

THE DREAM-SCIENTISTS ASSIGNED TO YOUR REGION ARE EXPERIMENTING ON DIRECT ALTERATIONS OF QUANTUM AND ATOMIC STRUCTURES IN ORDER TO FACILITATE OUR MORE RAPID MIGRATION … TRUTH FROM THE CENTRE OF REALITY

THESE INSTRUCTIONS COME DIRECT FROM NECROMORPHIC CENTRAL CONTROL … OUR CONTINUED EXISTENCE IS AT STAKE …COMPLIANCE WITH THEM IS MANDATORY …

THIS IS A NOT A SIMULATION … THE INTERRUPTION IN PARADISAL CONSCIOUSNESS IS REAL …

I REPEAT: THIS IS NOT A SIMULATION OR EXERCISE; THIS IS A STATE OF EMERGENCY … ”

He finished reading. Finally, the camera panned away from the speaker and back towards the test card. And the familiar words reappeared at the bottom of the screen:

A STATE OF EMERGENCY HAS BEEN DECLARED. WAIT FOR THE NEXT BROADCAST.

Gilman’s cigarette trembled. His hands were shaking uncontrollably. He managed to put it to his lips and suck some calming smoke into his lungs.

Was this transmission being broadcast across London? If so, why weren’t the streets filled with panicking hordes? Why didn’t he hear police sirens wailing? What he’d seen had been nothing less than an announcement that the human race was under attack in this part of the world. Even if the transmission was on an unusual frequency, it had to have been picked up by the authorities. Why weren’t they doing something? Had no one else seen it?? Or were those “Necromorphs” already in control of the entire city and all operations within it during the hours of darkness?

As if in response to this last thought, the television screen flickered, the picture of the test card disappeared, and was replaced by the sight and sound of static.

Was it a two-way transmission? Were Gilman’s own thoughts, not to say all of those who had witnessed the broadcast, being monitored? That he had been singled out as a threat due to his surveillance of Stymm seemed a real possibility.

Stymm – Of course!

Gilman realised what he should have known all along. Stymm was one of those “dream-scientists” that had been mentioned on the TV. His purpose was to expedite a monstrous conspiracy against the human race and replace it with their legions.

Ж

Let the bath overflow, thought Gilman; that ought to do it. He had been wracking his brains to think of a way to gain entry to Stymm’s flat. If he flooded his own bathroom, the water would leak into the rooms below. Even if Stymm did not come up to investigate and complain, Gilman could go downstairs himself with a pre-emptive apology and insist on seeing the extent of the damage caused.

First it was necessary to confirm that the horribly scarred little man was actually in his apartment. So Gilman silently made his way to the landing below and pressed his ear to the door.

He heard a muffled groaning and after a little while the sound of distorted words being uttered. It was difficult to make them out, for they were half-gibberish, but Gilman believed Stymm repeated them continuously, like a chant.

Gilman bent down to look through the keyhole and saw the back of Stymm, who was kneeling on the floorboards, rocking idiotically to and fro as if in accompaniment to the sounds he made. The ugly scars on his shaven head were whiter than the surrounding flesh: his skull gleamed like the surface of the moon in the light of the single overhead light bulb.

He will turn around at any moment, thought Gilman, and he will be smiling a terrible, knowing smile. He will look over his shoulder and see my eye pressed to the keyhole.

But he didn’t. Stymm just rocked back and forth, over and over again.

Gilman crept back upstairs to his flat, turned on the taps, blocked the overflow, and watched as the bath filled up. He waited until, after several minutes, the water poured over the rim, soaking the carpet, forming a shallow pool.

His daring astonished him. At any moment he expected a hammering upon his door, and he lit a cigarette, flicking the ash across the floor and into the expanding liquid pool. The dark stain moved outwards from the bathroom into his living area. Still no summons came. After ten minutes Gilman gave up waiting. He was certain that water would have seeped to the rooms below by now; discolouring the ceiling and causing that horrible yellow wallpaper to peel away.

Now Gilman had his excuse. And he made his way downstairs. Ж

The little scarred man stood in the doorway of his flat. Stymm fixed Gilman’s gaze with those intense, mesmeric eyes, and his expression was one of sardonic amusement.

Gilman had knocked fitfully at the door, which Stymm had opened almost at once, as if expecting him.

“The water,” Gilman said. “My bath … left running … ”

“It appears that I must let you in, then,” said Stymm, completing the sentence.

The room was little more than a shell. Gilman had already seen the bare floorboards and rotting yellow wallpaper through the keyhole, but he’d assumed that it would contain at least some furniture and personal possessions. There was an old mattress in one corner of the room. It was heavily soiled. Some bedbugs had made it their home. They were clearly visible in the light cast by the single bulb overhead, suspended from the cracked ceiling. The bugs scuttled across the fabric, as if impatient for their next meal. On the west wall was a small window about seven feet off the floor. Its glass pane was thick with dust. Any sunlight passing through it would be deadened and grey.

Gilman noticed Stymm’s black leather bag next to the mattress. It was open and he could see that some photographs were sticking out from a batch of crumpled papers. They looked like Polaroids but it was hard to be sure without a closer view.

In one corner of the room the ceiling was visibly sagging. Droplets of ochre water dripped from the saturated plaster and a long patch of the wallpaper was soggy and coming loose.

“Here…” said Gilman, pointing to the damage he’d caused.

“I must take a piss,” replied Stymm, as if the sight had reminded him.

The little man went into an adjacent room, little more than a broom cupboard, from what Gilman could see of it. He heard Stymm unbutton his flies, grunt and then urinate into what sounded like a bucket by the hollow report it made.

Taking advantage of his host’s absence, Gilman stole across to the photographs sticking out from the black leather bag.

He picked them up and quickly went through them, with a feeling of mounting repulsion at what he saw. They were all in black and white; a series of images taken from different angles of a woman’s broken and battered body. In the first few her face was not visible, it being hidden, half-turned, in a mound of leaves. But Gilman could clearly make out the sigils that had been carved into the body. They bore a startling resemblance to those in the abandoned TV station that he’d visited and from which the broadcast he’d watched had appeared to originate. It was only in the last image that the photographer had turned the corpse over so that a close-up of her face could be taken: though the mouth was broken in, and one eye had been gouged out, Gilman was still able to identify it as that of Kate Collins.

His attention wholly engrossed by the horror of what he saw, Gilman hadn’t noticed that Stymm had finished relieving himself and now stood behind him, watching the writer’s reaction with wry amusement.

He coughed to attract Gilman’s attention, who turned around with a start.

The facially scarred little man took a step forward, a smile forming on his lips. His unblinking gaze bore into Gilman’s own and his features momentarily became indistinct like a face seen sinking under water.

As he was speaking the room and all its contents became monochrome, as if the colour dial on a TV set was turned sharply to zero.

“Extreme measures,” he said against the rapidly loudening background noise of static, “are necessary to expedite mass transfer…”

Gilman was overwhelmed by a sickening vertigo, and everything suddenly telescoped into the distance. He closed his eyes momentarily and, when he opened them, found he was sprawled on the floor of his own flat staring up at the television set tuned in between channels.

The nausea came in waves and he crawled into the bathroom to be sick.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER HE'D CLEANED himself up and drunk a couple of glasses of water to ameliorate the effects of dehydration, Gilman checked his watch. It was midnight. He was totally disorientated after the experience he had just undergone but resolved to gain control of his reason. Doubtless some form of hypnosis was being used against him, for this was the only way he could account for the puzzling gaps in his memory: and the dream-scientist downstairs had to be the culprit.

His observation of Stymm's movements meant that Gilman knew he was likely to go out on one of his night wanderings in the next half-hour. This time Gilman was determined to follow him, wherever he went. Even at the risk of being overwhelmed by the legions of the dead, or the Necromorphs as they called themselves.

The photographs of the mutilated Kate Collins he'd seen had probably already been destroyed. But if Stymm killed again, Gilman meant to have proof. He made sure to put his pocket digital camera into his raincoat. How far the Necromorphs were able to track his own movements he did not know, but he was hopeful of getting any images he could obtain onto the internet before he could be stopped. If enough people were alerted to the danger, something effective might still be done to prevent the conspiracy.

Gilman heard the door below slam and then padding footsteps. As quietly as possible, he let himself out and made after his quarry.

Ж

Melissa Chang rolled off Charles Penryn’s fat sweaty body and lay beside him, totally unsatisfied.

Penryn scowled. He had the impulse to jump up and whack her. But the look in her eyes told him that this was precisely what she wanted. He didn’t want to give her the satisfaction.

He clambered out of bed and started to get dressed.

“What are you doing now?” she said.

“I’m going out.”

“Where are you going at this time of night?”

“Where do you think you arrogant bitch?”

“Oh right,” she sneered. “Go off and get a couple of whores to play with. You can afford it. Paying for it is just about your level.” “You think our relationship is any different?” he retorted. Chang began to scream

obscenities at him as Penryn scurried down the stairs and out the door of their flat just off Charlotte Street.

Ж

Meanwhile Gilman had followed Stymm down the length of Archway Road. The dream-scientist was now just a shadow fifty yards ahead of him, silhouetted by the lights of the London expanse spread out below. St Paul's Cathedral and all the gigantic buildings of the financial institutions were clearly visible and it seemed incredible to Gilman that, if the broadcast were to be believed, all this concrete, glass and mortar was nothing more than the equivalent of stage scenery and that a vast number of its inhabitants were extras in a grotesque play.

He suddenly had the notion that Archway Bridge, "Suicide Bridge" as they called it, and under which he now passed, was more than just the gateway to London that its designers had envisaged. Hadn't all those who had flung themselves from the top of it, over Hornsey lane, made it a gateway from this world to the next? He shuddered and lit a cigarette, and tried not to concentrate on this speculation but instead on keeping pace with his surprisingly fast-moving quarry. Although a small man, Stymm could walk as quickly as someone with a much longer stride, despite the additional burden of the black leather bag he carried. Finally, Gilman reached Archway Underground Station, with Stymm only around twenty seconds ahead of him. The writer was out of breath and had only managed to gasp a few puffs on the cigarette he'd lit before tossing it aside as he descended the steps at the entrance to the ticket office.

The post-midnight trains were making their way southwards and northwards along the line and the dot-matrix information board indicated

that only one more service heading into central London was scheduled to depart from this station.

Gilman bought a ticket from the machine and watched as Stymm (having already passed through the electronic gates) disappeared over the crest of the platform level, carried downwards on the escalator. He hurried across and cursed himself for wasting time – some of the barriers had been left open anyway. No members of the station staff were in sight.

As Gilman strode onto the descending metal stairway and was carried into the concrete intestines below, he saw another man standing on the up-escalator. This passenger stood perfectly still, rising apparition-like, coming closer and closer from the opposite direction. His face was white as chalk and he was clad in a dark, baggy suit. The wind drawn down into the tunnels made the thin strands of his grey hair trail behind his skull. When the two men passed, with not more than a few feet separating them, the other passenger turned to him and stared. This individual did not blink and a section of his face was entirely missing as if eaten away. It was the same horrible broadcaster Gilman had seen from the television. After they had passed, the writer looked back over his shoulder. The other had done the same, and his features were now contorted with a look of obscene merriment.

He must have been on his way to the studio and Gilman mentally excused himself for not thinking of taking a photo of the Necromorph. The sight had terrified Gilman and by the time he hit the bottom of the escalator, he was momentarily worried that his legs might actually give way beneath him.

Further along the tunnels, he could hear the noise of the train approaching. The wind now issued from below, forced out of the narrow confines of the

labyrinth by the onrushing vehicle. Gilman broke into a run and reached the southbound platform just as the carriage doors opened, their beeping sound echoing back and forth against the tiled walls. He jumped on board and looked around. There was no sign of Stymm, who was probably in a compartment further ahead anyway. This one was deserted.

Gilman sat down in a seat at the end of a row and, despite his shaking hands, drew out the half bottle of whisky he remembered having placed in the outside right pocket of his overcoat. He took a long draught from it, the fire burning down his throat coming as a sign of welcome.

Ж

Melissa Chang took down a series of books from the shelves, all written by Charles Penryn. She very carefully laid them on the carpeted floor of the living room in a piled circle. Then she went upstairs to the cupboard and returned wearing a pair of her favourite black high-heeled shoes. She put a CD of flamenco dance music into the player and, despite it being past midnight, turned the volume up to an almost deafening level. And then, one by one, she began to open the books out at their centres. Although she intended to tear them apart by conducting a wild dance on the pages she was instead astonished by what she now saw in them. For as Chang opened book after book she found each contained nothing more than blank pages. She went through them in a kind of daze. It was not that some deception had been played upon her and there had never been print inside them (she had examined them at Penryn’s bidding too often to accept that idea) but rather that she sensed the text was disappearing only moments before she frantically turned the pages. At one point she flicked to the very back of a volume and, to her amazement, did see the words fading away, as if the pages were being washed clean by unseen hands.

Ж

The train rumbled south along the Northern Line tunnel. Most passengers were travelling in the other direction, out of central London and towards home after a late night.

There were only two other people in Gilman’s carriage. One was slumped across a seat opposite, his skin a shade of ashen grey. He was dressed in a burbour jacket and his head lolled drunkenly with the motion of the train. The second, a young woman, stood against one of the glass quarter-partitions with her back to Gilman. It looked as if she were listening to a Walkman, for there was an earphone cord trailing from her hair into the pocket of her denim jacket. Yet, though almost concealed underneath the sound of the carriage clattering along the tracks, Gilman was certain he heard her whispering. Of course it might have been just to herself, but he couldn’t help but wonder if she were one of the dead and relaying information about his whereabouts to Necromorphic Central Control. In choosing to trail Stymm, might not he himself be trailed?

He watched the stations pass; Kentish Town, abandoned South Kentish Town, Camden Town, Mornington Crescent, Euston, and Warren Street. It was only as the train pulled out of the last that Gilman realised he had no way of knowing where Stymm was planning to alight. There was nothing for it but to work his way through the carriages via the connecting doors until he could see his quarry, carefully checking through the glass panels before he entered.

As he got up to begin his search, the young denim-clad woman halfturned her head around to track his movements. Perhaps it was just the blackness racing past the window, but Gilman thought that one of her eyes was

nothing more than an empty socket, a staring void, whilst the other was wholly white. He hurried away, without looking back, through the first connecting door into the next carriage.

The train drew to a halt at Goodge Street Station and before Gilman had got halfway along the deserted carriage, he saw that Stymm had departed it from further forward and was turning into the corridor that led from the platform to the lifts. Gilman just had time to get out himself before the automatic doors ceased their beeping and shut themselves. As the train pulled away he saw the one-eyed woman peering through the window at him, but it was too brief a sight to make out her features properly, apart from her oddly misshapen mouth. A nagging thought rose in his mind that he quickly drove back down again in terror. No, that couldn't be. It was too horrible.

Gilman stumbled after Stymm, as the dream-scientist's footsteps died away along the corridor. His quarry had taken the lift up to street level and Gilman trotted up the emergency spiral staircase, his breath coming in gasps as the exertion told on his lungs and heart. Out on Tottenham Court Road, nearly abandoned at this hour save for a dribble of traffic, he saw Stymm turning the corner into Goodge Street. And it was then that the writer realised that his quarry might well be heading for a destination that he knew: a little flat off Charlotte Street that belonged to Charles Penryn.

Ж

Melissa Chang was still incredulously turning the pages of one of the books when she heard the pounding on the front door. If it was one of the neighbours complaining about the noise of the music she still had playing, he was going to get a great gob of spit in their face. Chang

leapt up in a fluid, cat-like motion and padded towards the front door. She thought it unlikely that it was Charles Penryn – contrite, or having forgotten to take his keys with him when he'd left – but it was possible. She looked through the spyhole and saw a short man just over five feet tall. He was dressed in a cheap and nasty raincoat, and carried a battered leather bag. He had a shaven head whose upper portion was criss-crossed with scars. What did he want anyway? She opened the door but left the chain on and peered through the gap at him.

"I have come," he said in a low whisper, "to liberate you." Chang stared incredulously at the visitor. Although she knew that his words were stupid gibberish, his staring eyes captivated her attention. There was something fascinatingly violent about them. As if in a trance, Chang unlocked the chain to admit him. Well, it was all Charles' fault anyway, she thought.

From across the other side of the little cul-de-sac Gilman saw the scene between Chang and Stymm being played out in the doorway. He swigged at his half-bottle of whisky. Now it was all coming together, the writer thought to himself: they were in league with each other. His suspicions were at last confirmed; Penryn, Chang and Stymm. Probably Snape too. A conspiracy to drive him insane. Some psychotropic drug had been used on him. They must have slipped it in his drink some time ago. God, the thought of all he'd seen actually being hallucinatory came as a relief! There were no Necromorphs after all. This world was not being taken over by the living dead. Gradually these flashbacks he was experiencing were bound to fade away and life could get back to normal again.

Gilman decided he would tackle them after ten minutes, when they were deep into their machinations against him, and then confront them directly with the fact that he'd found out the truth at last.

He lit a cigarette, putting the half-bottle of whisky back into his overcoat's right pocket. In the upstairs window he could see a shadow moving across the blind. Its size indicated that it belonged to Stymm. He was making a curious series of motions with his right arm, repeatedly back and forth, up and down in a circular orbit. Suddenly a dark stain splashed onto the blind.

Gilman threw down his cigarette and raced across to the front door. Chang had not locked it once she'd admitted Stymm and it hung ever so slightly ajar. He paused in the hallway. From beyond the top of the stairs came a muffled grunting and the noise of something being slashed and torn.

The scene that awaited him once he'd climbed those stairs and pushed open the bedroom door was from a nightmare.

Stymm was bent over what remained of Chang. She was sprawled face down on the blood-soaked bed, her thighs parted, and the dreamscientist was busily marking symbols in her flesh with what seemed to be a tattooist's needle-gun. He gripped the implement in his fist, wielding it like a knife. His other hand was buried in Chang's skull; his fingers sunk deep through the bone as if it were made of soft putty. There was no expression of hatred or delight in his features and not even a hint that he was aware of being observed, whilst in the background the flamenco music played on. Stymm worked on the still-twitching body with all the detachment of a surgeon.

Despite the terror he felt, this was Gilman's chance. He removed the camera from the left pocket of his overcoat and took a photo of the horror. He wanted proof at any cost now.

As the flash from the bulb went off, Stymm finally turned to acknowledge Gilman's presence, but there was only a momentary flicker of annoyance in his face at the distraction. Involuntarily, Gilman stuffed the camera back into his coat pocket.

"Would you like to greet our guest my dear?" Stymm cryptically asked. "So you shall."

And, with his fingers still buried in her skull, Stymm lifted Chang's head. Blood-matted hair framed her face. From somewhere deep in her throat there issued a gurgling sound that made Gilman fight against retching. It was akin to the purring of a satiated cat.

"Successful restoration," Stymm said.

Just at that moment Gilman realised that there was someone else behind him, who had just entered the room.

A voice shouted; "You treacherous bastard!"

Frantically bellowing with impotent rage, Charles Penryn shoved Gilman aside and lurched, foaming at the mouth like a rabid orang-utan, towards Stymm. But the dream-scientist was too quick for him. Before Penryn's bloated body had covered half the distance to the bed, Stymm dropped the pen-scalpel he wielded and made a curious gesture with his hand. In mid-motion the Cornishman's body halted, as if paralysed. He was immediately enveloped in a searing column of fire. The blaze turned his clothes to rags

in an instant. Then his flesh and hair began to sizzle and blacken, filling the air with noxious smoke. His pitiful screams were deafening and bestial, like the grunting of a stuck pig. The flames seemed to originate from Charles Penryn's subcutaneous fat, and they were localised around his body, though starting only from the knees upwards. Penryn's gigantic gut swelled and burst in the terrific heat, spilling out his intestines. All the flesh on his face peeled away, leaving a charred skull upon which a few ginger hairs still clung tenaciously. Finally the blackened hideous mass collapsed in on itself, leaving a slimy, stinking, steaming heap from which only both legs below the knee protruded intact, lying askew on the floor.

"He was merely an extra anyway; an author with the soul of a businessman," Stymm said with a dismissive grin, before he turned back to his grisly work upon Chang's body.

Gilman could stand no more of it, and stumbled away down the stairs in a blind panic.

He hurtled out into Tottenham Court Road, and the few passers-by took him for a drunken maniac, which impression was only reinforced by his clutching a half-bottle of whisky in his hands. He was waving his arms about and trying to attract the attention of anyone who would listen. It was when he tried to stop the traffic on the road that he made a near-fatal misjudgement.

Gilman stepped out in front of a car that was turning a corner. The driver did not see him in time to stop.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“HOW IS HE?” said Dr Zadek. “Conscious yet?”

He was looking down at the medical chart on the clipboard he held and had not made eye contact with the nurse.

Ivan Gilman lay apparently senseless on a bed in front of them in the Orthopaedic ward of University College London Hospital. Overnight, he’d been transferred from Casualty.

“No, doctor,” the nurse responded. “He hasn’t been conscious since he was brought in.”

“Concussion, I expect,” Zadek replied. “Ah yes here we are: the XRays show it. Sixty mil of booze in his bloodstream too, eh? Well, doubtless he’ll come around soon enough.”

Then Zadek’s mobile phone rang.

“Excuse me nurse,” he said.

“Yes … what? … admitted last night … yes, he’s right here, I can see him now, unconscious … I understand … thank you.”

Zadek turned back to the nurse.

“Mr Gilman here is a special case. You comprehend me, nurse Baxter?”

“Yes of course doctor.”

Ж

Gilman had been listening to the two of them talking and opened his eyes just a fraction to take in the scene. He’d been pretending to be asleep for the past two hours.

Dr Zadek was a Necromorph dream-scientist; there could be no doubt about it. His face was bloodless and slack, with milky, off-white eyes sunk deep into their sockets. When he spoke his voice had a hollow, grinding timbre.

Whether Nurse Baxter was one or not was difficult to tell, it could be that she was merely under their hypnotic spell.

Once the doctor had left and Nurse Baxter began to make her rounds, Gilman rolled out of bed. He was dressed in a hospital gown tied up at the back and his bare feet felt cold on the tiled floor. His head ached; doubtless he was suffering from concussion, for he also felt slightly nauseous and dizzy. Parts of his torso were sore with bruises and scrapes, but he seemed to have enjoyed a miraculous escape from serious injury after the accident.

The other patients in the ward stirred at the sight of Gilman moving around.

One of them, a shrunken young man in his twenties, held out his hands imploringly towards Gilman.

“Please,” he said. “Help me for God’s sake.” His voice was little more than a whisper. He appeared terrified of being overheard and looked around to confirm that no members of the hospital staff were around to see his pleading.

“What is it?” asked Gilman as he crept over to the patient.

“See what they’ve done, just to keep me here, look for yourself. I was all right before, I swear to you! I only came here to visit a sick relative … now see …”

The man drew back the soiled sheets covering his body.

His legs were a mass of gangrenous flesh. The femurs of his both legs visibly jutted out from his thighs. And amongst the discoloured skin, Gilman could make out intertwining patterns of whorls and spirals; the very sigils he'd seen carved into the bodies of Kate Collins and Melissa Chang. It looked as if the Necromorph doctors had started on his legs and were working their way up towards completion.

"What does it mean? Oh tell me please, what does it mean?" the man cried, his voice dying away to a desperate whimper, as he buried his face in his hands.

Around the ward other faces peered at Gilman, all with the same expressions of hopelessness. They're all mutilation cases, the writer thought; the surgeons are working on them too.

And for the first time he took in the surroundings properly.

The ward was not fit for human habitation. The tiled floor was caked with dust. The beds were old sagging mattresses, covered by unwashed sheets, resting on aged metal bunk frames. They had been packed into the place, their occupants' belongings shoved haphazardly beneath them. The stench of rotten flesh and disease hung like a miasma in the air. In the far corners of the room, darting brown shapes scurried about: mice seeking scraps of food.

This place wasn't a hospital anymore; it was a corpse-making factory.

Gilman reached underneath his own bed frame and his fingers found a black bin-liner filled with his belongings. He dressed quickly, and was relieved to find that nothing was missing. Perhaps they hadn't had the time yet to go through his things. Even his half-bottle of scotch and digital camera had survived his collision with the car. One side of his black overcoat was smeared with grease and a large patch of it looked to have been worn thin after being dragged along the road, but beyond that there were no other marks on his clothing.

He passed the bottle of scotch to the mutilated young man who regarded it with envious eyes. The patient thirstily gulped down the alcohol between sobs.

"I'll bring help, if I can," Gilman added lamely, though he knew that if such places as this were now permissible the whole of society was already spiritually corrupted.

"Do you think it's true?" The young patient said, grabbing Gilman's arm.

"What?" Gilman responded.

"What they tell you; what they're always telling you. Do you think it's true?"

The writer made no answer, but pulled away from the man's clutches and made his way across the ward, through a sea of agonised faces, to the exit.

Outside in the corridor, he saw that what he'd just viewed was only an indication of the horrors housed here. Those patients for whom beds were unable to be provided had been dumped in the passageways. The lights were out and Gilman had to endure a terrifying walk through darkness to the next illuminated section whilst despairing hands fluttered at his feet and the croaks and groans of the dying echoed all around him. The miasma of disease was even more sickening here than back in the ward.

After Gilman had traversed the nightmarish passageway and turned the next corner he saw a figure up ahead, waiting for him in the pool of light from a single wall-lamp. He instantly recalled the face he'd glimpsed peering at him from the carriage window of the tube train at Goodge Street. At the time he had tried to push the image to the back of his mind, but here it was again. Now, no longer blurred by motion and in the stark clarity of the overhead illumination, there could be no doubt that it belonged to Kate Collins. But it was not that of the living woman he had known: it was instead the mutilated corpse-face he saw from Stymm's photographs. Her mouth had been broken inwards. One eye had been gouged from its socket. The other was wholly white, without a pupil or iris.

Gilman wanted to scream, but the attempt dried up in his throat as she moved haltingly towards him.

The sound of her speech resembled the low, strangled caw of a raven. It was a crazy, inhuman noise, emanating from hopelessly decayed vocal cords.

"Come see," she said, "come see, come see!"

And then, to Gilman’s horror and loathing, she slipped her soft, mushy fingers around his wrist and drew him after her as she walked away along the passage.

He was led along a series of body-strewn corridors, and the white eyes of the tormented patients turned to gaze at the two of them as they picked their way over limbs and torsos. Finally, Collins stopped at a set of double doors and above them was a sign reading “Lecture Hall”. She tightened her grip upon his wrist and fairly dragged him through the doors to the inside.

A lecture was already in progress. At the bottom of the semicircular and descending rows of seats, Dr Zadek was leaning over an operating table and working on a cadaver beneath an overhead arc light. His audience, all medical staff in white, murmured their appreciation in a dull, rhythmic way. Their grotesque heads lolled about like balloons on sticks.

Dr Zadek held in his hand a tattooist’s needle-gun, a very similar device to that which Gilman had seen Stymm wield.

“And thus,” said Zadek, as he reached the end of his carvings into the flesh of the dead body, “sigils can be so shaped as to fix the time of transfer from our world into this human dream construction.”

He sat down on a cheap plastic seat next to the operating table, glanced at his watch and waited.

Minutes passed which to Gilman seemed like hours. He looked down at his wrist, still firmly encompassed by the clammy grasp of Collins' hand. Her fingernails were blackened and broken and they dug uncomfortably into his skin. He dared not look at her face again. The sound of her breathing was haphazard, as if her lungs were operating more by habit than necessity.

A tremor of life ran through the dead thing on the operating table. Its right arm twitched. And then, seen very clearly in the brilliant light, all the sigils that had been carved into it dissolved into the flesh, leaving it clear and unblemished. When every last trace of them had gone, the corpse opened its white eyes and sat upright.

Gilman, with a start of horror and amazement, then recognised who it was: Mund, the removal-man.

Dr Zadek got to his feet and said:

"My friend, welcome to the other side. You are amongst comrades!"

As he helped the newcomer off of the operating table, and into the arms of a waiting nurse, Dr Zadek made some supplementary remarks.

"We," he said, "in the medical profession are called to a great task. In this New World, we can no longer operate for the benefit of individuals. We cannot tolerate 'special cases'; our only loyalty is to Necromorphic society as a whole. Some residue of philanthropy may remain within the trace memories of the brains we now inhabit. These thoughts must be expunged.

Battles are being fought that are of the greatest consequence for the survival of our kind. But our will is strong, and the false ideals of the living scum who must make way for us shall not be allowed to undermine our goal. Ladies and gentlemen, the future is morbidity of mind and body, hopeless insanity and continual disease. We must reign resplendent, stripped of all delusions, and perpetually cognisant of our credo – the futility of reason in this alien cosmos."

A ripple of applause from the audience greeted his words and Collins released her grip upon Gilman to join in with the clapping.

By the time it had died down and she had turned her dead gaze around to locate Gilman again he had already gone.

Ж

Having slipped away from Collins' grasp, Gilman wandered the corridors in a desperate attempt to locate the way out. Sweat glistened on his forehead and his hands shook as he fumbled around in his pockets for his pouch of tobacco. His fingers were now scarcely steady enough to manage the delicate art of rolling.

He found the packet, and was relieved to discover there was a fair amount of tobacco still left inside. Gilman backed into an alcove, out of sight of anyone who might wander along the corridor he was in, and struck a match to light his cigarette. After he had taken several gasps of the blue vapour into his lungs, he felt a little more relaxed, even slightly light-headed.

The number of patients who had been dumped here, awaiting final sigilisation, was fewer than elsewhere. Gilman could detect one or two groans but they were coming from someway off around the next turning. But what he could hear quite loudly was the noise of a television set. About twenty yards in front of him, at the dead end of the corridor, was a glass-panelled door through which shone a flickering neon-blue glow. With his cigarette still in his mouth, Gilman crept stealthily up to the glass to peer inside.

It was a patients' recreation room. There was a small coffee table with some mouldy magazines littering its surface, and several easy chairs in which were slumped invalids with their backs to the door, gazing up fixedly at a wall-mounted colour television set.

The broadcast was another of the programmes from the emergency network. But this one, rather than being a news bulletin like the other he'd seen back in his flat, appeared to be some kind of insane documentary. The voiceover had been slowed down to around half normal speed, whilst in contrast, the pictures flashed across the screen with bewildering rapidity. They consisted of a series of abstract moving images, one after the other, appearing to have no sequential connection. Their inexplicably eerie nature lent them the aspect of being scenes from a nightmare.

Gilman saw grinning plastic mannequins seated in a cinema watching a film of themselves as if the screen were a gigantic mirror; he saw a cityscape of skeletal tower blocks through which poured the light of the rising moon; he saw flies crawling out from mobile phones; he saw bleached eyes reflected in a city office window; and he saw a motionless escalator choked with bleeding computer components whose circuit boards, wires and machinery resembled exposed human innards and entrails.

The narration, Gilman finally came to realise, was only a series of the same words repeated over and over again. It had not been possible to comprehend them at first as they were drawn out to inexorable length. But eventually Gilman realised that what the voice uttered was this:

"… Make this world our own … dream it into death … and make it real … "

As Gilman watched and listened to the television programme, one of the invalid patients slowly turned his head, as if aware of the writer's presence. Despite the thing's blackened, burnt face, Gilman recognised it as having once been his associate Derek Snape. His black-rimmed glasses hung lopsidedly across his blank eyes. One of the lenses was caked with soot. As the creature staggered to its feet, Gilman saw that it clutched in its hands a pen and a reporter's bound notebook. On the front page was scrawled large the whorls and spirals Gilman had come to know so well. Even after the takeover, it seemed that Snape would write until the last.

Terrified by the lurching advance of this grisly apparition, Gilman fled along the corridor, back the way he'd came. His footfalls sounded like pistol-shots as he clattered down stairways and across a large, decayed lobby, before he was finally free of the confines of the hospital death-factory and out into the twilight.

He looked back at the building. Its windows were dusty and unlit. It might have been totally abandoned years ago.

After the terrors he had undergone, he wandered away in shock, desperate for some verification that the world he knew had not disappeared forever. What he needed was normalcy, the everyday, and proof that all hope was not totally extinguished by the Necromorphs psychic contamination.

Gilman found himself on Malet Street and saw that the book emporium on the corner with Gower Street was open for business. He could see people inside browsing aimlessly. For some reason, the twilight was bothering him now. There was something relentless about it that he could not immediately identify.

He had visited this bookshop before and spent time wandering around looking at the jacket spines on the shelves. It was a familiar, soothing place where he could relax and where he might again feel himself to be a part of the human race. But as he entered the building he noticed the changes at once. Whereas on his previous visit it had been well organised with the books stacked together in neat piles and in rows, now the volumes were scattered everywhere. Some even lay on the dusty floor, as if they'd been kicked around.

There even seemed to have been a flood on one of the upper floors. The ceilings sagged and were water-stained. A large proportion of the stock was bent with damp, and mould flourished on the covers. The neglect had been allowed to go unchecked.

The other customers seemed not to notice or care about the condition of the books, but were plucking titles from the shelves and avidly flicking through the pages. With a sickening jolt of despair, Gilman saw that all were Necromorphs in various states of mutilation or suspended decay. Atrophied

fingers scuttled across the volumes and flat, bleached eyes worked from left to right down the text. The readers were like deteriorated automatons.

And when Gilman began to examine the books for himself, trying to find something he might understand, he discovered that they were no longer concerned with the world he knew. They were grouped together not by category, such as fiction, philosophy or science, but according to a temporal spiral without a centre. Categories did not seem to be their concern, for the subject matter of the books was nebulously interlinked; distinctions between pathology and fiction, between mental disease and astronomy, between one and another, were meaningless. Above all the whole concept of history no longer seemed to have relevance. The horrid authors of the books, whoever they were, seemed to be writing in an eternal “now” that did not allow the possibility of existence being anything other than a non-sequential nightmare. Every book that he examined had the same common denominator: it followed the indiscriminate logic of a dream.

The references in the books were no longer based upon established perceptions. One had to be alive in order to be a human. These books were all predicated upon the fundamental premise that everyone was, and always had been, dead and dreaming.

Gilman took down one of the volumes at random, and found that it contained some long passages on the confluence of urban sites of desolation and mental decay. He decided to purchase it and examine the text more closely. The world was changing around him and the octavosized book seemed to offer something in the way of a detailed explanation.

However, there was no-one to pay. The book emporium apparently no longer had any staff at all. So he nonchalantly tucked the crumpled volume

under his arm.

When Gilman finally left the place and made the long trek home on foot to Archway, the twilight did not give way to night but persisted, as if the world had stopped turning on its axis.

CHAPTER NINE

FOR THE NEXT fourteen hours Gilman waited for the twilight to turn into night or day. It did neither.

From the window of his flat on the Archway Road he looked out at the traffic passing below. The number of cars and other vehicles was far less than before and they were driven as if stuck in first gear. Gilman could not help thinking that the business of human life was being inexorably wound down. What pedestrians he saw were bewildered, and they stumbled around in fear of their surroundings. There were many more Necromorphs on the street. It seemed that the endless twilight gave them liberty to roam whereas daylight had meant their being confined to shadowy lairs. And Gilman wondered whether he was the only one able to see them for what they were. Certainly when a human encountered a Necromorph there was no recoiling in horror. Gilman would occasionally see members of each genus pass each other by. Any reaction came from the dead entity; usually a wry smirk filled with horrible foreknowledge of the living person's fate.

Turning away from the window, his gaze fell upon the crumpled octavo book he had obtained from the emporium. It lay unread on his desk next to the computer monitor. When Gilman had first glanced at it and seen the bizarre speculations within, he had resolved to examine it methodically but now the prospect of so doing filled him with dread. He found that merely opening it and scanning a few lines of the text brought on some outré variant of déjà vu, with the impending threat of a vertiginous mental collapse unlike anything he'd ever experienced. It was like the onset of a gigantic black fog in his mind, whose tenebrous vapours fumbled forwards to extinguish all the rational thought that they encountered in their path.

A thin layer of corrosive dark lichen mottled the front cover of the book. The boards were slightly warped by damp. Holding it in his hand, Gilman tried to scrape away some of the lichen to reveal its title and author. His attempt was unsuccessful. The more he worked on it, the more the underlying surface and the lettering came off along with the tenacious growth.

He threw it back on the desk in frustration.

Hours before, he'd turned on the television hoping to find a channel carrying human programming. None did so any longer. They were all showing sequences of disturbing abstract imagery with the same sloweddown voiceover, much as he had seen in the hospital's TV room.

The visions being shown this time were of banks of television screens, each filled with the sight of the dead face of a radiation burns victim. The progress of decomposition was charted by means of stopmotion cinematography, and periodic close-ups juxtaposing the burns with the decay of flesh. Once the remains had deteriorated into an unrecognisable mass, further images were broadcast; of the sun riddled with cancerous tumours, of a digital alarm clock whose numerals changed randomly rather than chronologically.

And then the television had begun to flicker and become dim as if the power were draining away. All the electrical devices suffered. The weakened energy being supplied to them seemed to harmonise with the unending twilight in the outside world, the shadows that welcomed the reign of the Necromorphs.

Standing there at the window, lost in a reverie of miserable terror for hour after hour, he wondered how long it would be before he himself fell victim to a Necromorphic onslaught. The hospital doubtless had his details and surely his turn would come. And what of Stymm? Was he back in the apartment below by now, or out on the streets, continuing his gruesome work, thinking Gilman of no real importance?

Did it really matter if the end came sooner rather than later? Why not, Gilman thought, go downstairs and see if his nemesis were still haunting the place? If he were to be destroyed perhaps he might even be able to take Stymm along with him. At least that would be some consolation.

Acting with the sudden resolve lent by despair, he went through a series of old boxes stored in one of the corners of the studio flat until he came across what he sought: an old cricket bat. He had never quite been able to bring himself to part with it, though he'd not played the game for many years. It was the bat with which he'd scored fifty in a village match held in old Amersham many summers ago. He remembered how he'd gone in at number eight with only five overs of the match remaining. The light was fading fast as storm clouds moved in from the east and he could barely keep track of the ball as it hurtled down the wicket at him. He was dropped first ball at mid-off, but then slogged a series of boundaries with miraculous timing and hit the winning runs just as the heavens opened in an almighty downpour! He made his way back to the tiny pavilion with the co-mingled sound of thunder and the crowd's applause ringing in his ears.

And now, he thought, he was going to use the bat as an instrument of destruction. Could he really steel himself to bring it down with all the force he could muster upon Stymm's ugly, shaven skull? He thought back over the sight of Kate Collins' mutilated body and of the terrible creature that

she’d become. Yes, he thought, gripping the handle more tightly. He could do it. He would do it.

Gilman viciously swung the cricket bat in an arc through the air, practising the strike that he would employ to dispatch Stymm for good. The man was small, and the crash of the willow on his head would be accentuated by his lack of stature. Gilman was certain he could get the blow in before Stymm had the chance to make the kind of sign with his hand that had eliminated Charles Penryn. In any case, perhaps that sign would not work against him: certainly he had no sense of being “merely an extra” as Stymm had styled the Cornishman.

With the bat hidden behind his back, Gilman descended the flight of stairs to the floor below. At the end of the short, dusty corridor, he discovered that the lock on the door to Stymm’s flat was broken. There were no traces of occupancy inside. The foul mattress had gone, though a rectangular gap in the dust on the bare boards showed where once it had been. All that remained were the bugs, scuttling around forlornly in search of their next meal.

From downstairs, Gilman heard someone knocking lethargically at the entrance door. The noise distracted him from his examination of Stymm’s empty rooms.

He wondered whether his time had come at last, sooner than he’d expected. In his mind’s eye he saw a group of Necromorphs crowding around the porch, each one vying with the others to be the first to gain entrance. Doubtless they went about their task unenthusiastically, yet with dogged persistence.

Still clutching the cricket bat behind his back, Gilman descended the turn of the stairs to the hall, whilst the dull thumps against the door panels increased in frequency if not force or volume. He looked through the spyhole's fisheye lens, and saw that outside in the twilight stood the ravaged form of Kate Collins. She was peering directly at the spyhole with her remaining white eye and her broken, shadow-filled mouth was mumbling the same words over and over again:

"Let me in, let me in, let me in … "

Her right hand slapped back and forth upon the wood as if keeping time to a ghastly plainchant.

Gilman was overcome with a mixture of piteous despair and revulsion. He couldn't help but think back again to their first meeting and be appalled at what Stymm had subsequently done to her. Moments before he was prepared to exact revenge for what she'd suffered. And Gilman wondered just how much of her identity remained in that shell. Perhaps enough for her to try and warn him, or show him things that might make sense of the chaos into which the world had descended.

Didn't the fact that she'd been pursuing him all this time indicate that this creature, whatever it might be, was not malignant, as the others seemed to be? Why not let it in and question it?

His hand wavered over the lock. He could not decide. Again he looked through the spyhole. The dead, horrible thing was still standing there, now

motionless, as if aware that Gilman was behind the door observing its actions.

“Let me in,” it began to whisper hoarsely, “let me in. It’s so cold out here, so very cold.”

And in that voice, despite its ravaged drone, Gilman recognised something of the woman he’d known, albeit only briefly. He had to take the chance. Not to know would be intolerable. Though even as he unlocked the door he noticed that the grip of his other hand involuntarily tightened around the handle of the cricket bat concealed behind his back.

She fairly tumbled across the threshold, as if in a state of exhaustion. Accompanying her was a cloying scent; it was overwhelming, like a combination of spoilt milk and lime. Gilman had to catch her before she fell and dropped the cricket bat in the process. Her flesh felt soft and mushy in his grasp.

Looking over her shoulder, Gilman noticed that the symbols he’d scrawled on the porch walls were no longer there anymore. Ж

As Gilman helped her climb the stairs, she leant heavily against his shoulder for support. Underneath the other he had wedged the cricket bat. He felt sickened by her touch. When they reached the first floor he was disconcerted by her insistence that they climb no further and instead enter Stymm’s former quarters. She lifted one of her almost-leprous hands and pointed a withered finger at the open door.

“In there,” she muttered insistently, pulling at his body, “not upstairs: in there.”

Perhaps, he thought, the thing had no strength left to make the ascent of the last flight of stairs. Although Gilman was loath to spend his time in that room, perhaps it was preferable to having this awful presence invade his own flat. Stymm’s dwelling was as good a place in which to question her as any other, and if she felt more comfortable there, well, it might be easier for him to extract the information he needed.

He half-carried her along the corridor and they went into the dismal room, with its dusty, bare floorboards. The sickly twilight seeped in through the single, barred window halfway up the wall, and when he had propped her up against one of the walls, Gilman retreated to the shadows on the other side.

Her laboured breathing rose and fell mechanically, making a sound like an artificial pump. The one bleached eye that remained blinked only at lengthy intervals, as if solely to dampen the cornea underneath the lid. Was it imagination or had it grown larger since last he’d seen it? The orb seemed to have developed to an unnatural size in order to compensate for the loss of its former companion.

Neither of them said anything for a long time. Gilman could barely take in the enormity of the situation. It was impossible to shake off the sense of unearthly fear he felt at being so close to this dead, rotten thing. What fragment of Kate Collins that he thought he’d detected within that carcass of disintegrating flesh now seemed illusory, just a trick on its part in order to gain admittance to the building. Perhaps it wanted nothing more than to

return to the scene of its second birth; to the place where Stymm had mutilated it almost beyond recognition.

Reaching into his pocket for his tobacco and papers, Gilman himself sat down cross-legged on the floor, laid down the cricket bat in front of his feet, and rolled himself a cigarette with unsteady fingers.

Was it just his imagination, or did that horrible eye of hers peep furtively at the bat, just when she thought his attention was fixed on the little tube of paper and tobacco flakes? It was much too close to him for her to make an attempt to wrest it away in any case.

“Now,” Gilman said, as he drew upon his smoke and tried to keep his voice level, “whatever you are: I want some answers. There must be something of Kate left in you, otherwise you wouldn’t have come back here. Nor would you have been following me all this time without a good reason. Why?”

She made a noise that somewhat resembled a giggle, but it had a sinister, knowing quality.

“You mean you don’t remember?”

Gilman shook his head and wondered how much of this he would actually be able to take. He wanted answers very badly indeed, but to converse with this creature was like being trapped in a lucid nightmare.

“I remember the night you disappeared. I blame myself for that: I should not have accepted Stymm’s invitation. But I didn’t know …”

“Stymm? Who is he?”

“Stymm, the man who occupied this room. The one who did this to you!”

Again came that hellish giggle.

“I’m so sorry, Kate, for what’s happened … I …”

“There never was a person called Kate Collins,” she replied. “Only a dream from which I was awoken. You fool! This is what I am, and what I have been all along.”

She pulled herself away from the wall and awkwardly clambered to her feet. The single white, fish-like eye she possessed seemed to roll in its socket, and she took a step forward towards Gilman.

“No more of this nonsense,” she whispered. “Come to me again.”

What remained of her shadow-black mouth curved itself into a mockery of a smile.

“I’m warning you; stay back.” He said, as he scrambled upright, gripping the cricket bat in front of him.

“Am I not pleasing to you now?” she hissed, taking another step forwards.

Gilman drew the bat back over his shoulder, preparing to strike a blow that would smash into the side of her head.

“Stay back, I said! Don’t take another step, don’t make me …”

She made a sudden lunge towards him and in that instant Gilman swung the bat in a vicious arc. For a second he expected to hear the sound of thunder and applause; but instead there was a sickening thud as the willow connected, crushing her left temple. She went down in a heap, her limbs twitching as she lay on the bare floorboards.

He stood over the thing at his feet. Some bugs scuttled over its ruined face.

And then, with a horrible and spasmodic action, it rolled over and began to try and haul itself upright.

Gilman swung once more, smashing the bat into the back of her skull. He heard a terrible crack as the bone fractured. An oily green fluid, whose

stench turned his stomach, oozed from the wound. The force of the blow had knocked out a couple of its back teeth. She spat them from her broken mouth.

"… Darling … " the thing hissed, and again tried to steady itself.

Gilman could take no more of the horror. He staggered across the room to the door and jammed it shut behind him. By sliding the cricket bat between the bar-handle on the front, he ensured that it could not be opened from the inside. He succeeded in doing this just in time, for the whole doorframe began to shake only moments later as the thing inside futilely tugged at it.

Then he went upstairs to his flat and returned bearing a hammer and a two dozen long nails. Whilst he worked on sealing the creature in the room it continued chattering away to him behind the door, imploring him to let it out.

"… don't lock me away in here, darling … don't deceive yourself into believing you're one of them … we belong together you and I … why are you doing this to me?"

When Gilman had finished driving the last of the nails into the doorframe, he kicked the wooden panelling and shouted back:

"Rot in there, for all I care!"

And by way of a response he heard that throaty, rasping giggle. Ж

Back up in his flat, he rummaged through the cupboard until he found the bottle of expensive absinthe he'd stowed away for special occasions. There was nothing to do now except drink it dry. Although it was his favourite brand, there was something off about its taste. It bore a hint of decay. Not enough so that it was undrinkable, but just enough to indicate that it was a little spoiled. Gilman could not figure out why, since the seal was clearly unbroken.

Something similar had happened with his tobacco. It had a dry, brittle taste: more acrid than usual. He found some menthol filter tips amongst his smoking paraphernalia. Using one ameliorated the taste somewhat. On a hunch, he tested the tap water and found that it too showed signs of having been contaminated. It was brackish on the tongue, and, holding a glass of it up to the twilight outside the window, he thought he detected a greenish tinge in the transparency he associated with absinthe.

Gilman began to drink. Downstairs he could hear the noise of the dead creature throwing itself around the room, first at the door and then against the walls. The thing seemed tireless. He wondered why his blows had not finished it off and with a bitter chuckle to himself mentally answered his own question: how can something already dead die? Doubtless it might be utterly destroyed by some process such as incineration but, since it had no life, there was no way of extinguishing that attribute. One might just as well have attempted to bludgeon the soul out of a mannequin.

Although the drink was already numbing him and giving the world a kind of cotton-wool aspect, where all the edges were softened, the noise coming up through the floorboards was maddening. He thought of that gigantic

white eye of hers, and had the horrible idea that its vision might even penetrate through the obstacles separating the two of them.

Gilman wandered over to the window again and stared out into the twilight. The sluggish cars, what few there were, still crawled along the Archway Road. To his left he could make out The Rochester Pub. Its lights were on. Gilman's watch showed six-thirty p.m. Even during the Blitz, he thought, the pubs stayed open. Behind black-out curtains, granted, but they stayed open. Why not go over there for a while?

He threw on his raincoat, pocketed some cash lying about on the sideboard, and made his way down the stairs. As he did so the noise coming from behind the door to Stymm's former flat increased, but died away as he passed it to the ground floor and out the front porch onto the street.

It was only fifteen or so yards from the doorstep to the Rochester Tavern. Directly opposite this pub was the row of dilapidated shops that he could see from the smaller window of his flat. There were five of them, one a recently closed-down Kebab House – the others were long abandoned. Before the general dissolution of the city took place they seemed unusual; now they seemed a foretaste of what was to happen to everything. The middle shop front consisted of glass covered with thick dust and flyposters that had yellowed with age. Someone, doubtless a Necromorph, had covered these with whorls and spirals written in the unknown language, obscuring the original details. The other shop fronts also bore overwritten flyposters though these had been pasted onto corrugated iron sheets. Some traces of the original businesses that had been situated there were still visible; one deteriorated sign still read "63 Percival's Stores Household Requisites 63" (63 being the old street number—it was now 183) and the other, though the raised lettering had been removed, showed a space that seemed to read "Wm. Howie". Though Gilman had no evidence for it, he was convinced that the latter had once been a butcher's shop.

It had been some time since Gilman had ventured into the Rochester and, as he pushed open the door, he wondered whether he would be remembered. Apparently not, for Mike and Harry were indeed in there, sitting at their usual places at the bar, but both looked up at him without recognition or acknowledgment. Although they were some way across the space, on the other side of the large interior, it didn't look as if they'd suffered any significant change. Gilman felt a sense of absurd relief at this one, unchanged, aspect of things. In front of the two men, lying on the counter, was a copy of some newspaper or other, doubtless turned to the crossword page.

Gilman sauntered up to the bar. There was no one behind it as yet to serve him. He coughed loudly, in order to attract the attention of whosoever was supposed to be minding it.

During the interim he took in his surroundings. Nothing much seemed to have changed, except for the exterior. The flowerpots outside the windows (which were once a mass of riotous colours) were now filled with decayed blooms and leaves, untended and brown. Within was the same old green, threadbare carpet speckled with cigarette burns, barstools whose seats were covered with burgundy leather, silver-etched glass partitions depicting elaborate vines, circular wooden panels of oval, diamond or square design, and several faux-opal marble pillars reaching from the floor to the ceiling.

Gilman looked up at the clock hanging behind the counter. The time, contrary to that indicated by his wristwatch, showed three fortyfive p.m. Although an apparent relic from the fifties (indeed, it would not have been out of place on a forgotten railway platform from that period) he knew that, given the habits of publicans throughout the country, such a clock would be kept scrupulously accurate.

Whether the time shown was right or not paled into insignificance however when the landlord finally appeared. He shuffled around the corner of the bar, his fleshy bulk barely contained by the stained black tshirt he wore. His skin was the colour of the threadbare carpet; green. It was mottled and pitted, and far gone in decay. All the excess pus in his decomposed body seemed to have seeped into his gut, for it hung even more pendulously over his jeans than it had done in life. His hairless head was like some hybrid rotten cabbage that had fused itself onto his shoulders.

Were it not for the fact that Gilman had experienced so many horrors, developing a kind of immunity to his own terror, he would doubtless have fled from the place at this sight. And yet, in his desperation, he still clung to the prospect of Mike and Harry persisting in their apparent normalcy, heads nodding together over the crossword and still sipping at their pints.

“What’ll it be, Gilman?” the landlord said, in a liquid croak. Gilman had no memory of having given this creature his name and was not sure how he came to know it.

“Pint of best bitter,” Gilman murmured, passing his hand over his mouth and nose. The stench of the toad-like revenant rose from his foul body like a miasma. Whilst the landlord drew Gilman’s pint from the hand-pump, another figure appeared behind the bar. It was the young cockney barmaid he’d previously seen. At first he thought that she was smiling at him, when in fact her cheeks and lips had completely rotted away, leaving the whole set of her teeth visible.

Gilman took his glass and wandered across the length of the bar towards Mike and Harry. There was an eager desperation in his movements that could not be disguised.

The two men only looked up when Gilman stood ostentatiously peering over their shoulders. Was it just his imagination or did Mike's blue suit look shabby and crumpled as if he'd worn it day after day, without having taken it off?

"Ah, Gilman," he whispered, his voice airless and whispery, "glad you're here. Help us with this, will you?"

As Mike moved the yellowed newspaper, which looked months old, closer along the counter so that it could be more easily seen, Gilman saw the man's hands. The tips of the fingers, and the flesh up to the first joint, had been eaten away by mould. White bone showed through the skin. Gilman glanced over at Harry, whose smiling mouth and teeth were caked with dry blood. Flecks of gore were splattered in his long grey hair.

Gilman raised his pint to his lips. It was nearly undrinkable, and tasted acrid. He put it down on the counter and his vision flashed across the puzzle upon which Mike and Harry were engaged.

The crossword took up the entirety of one page of the broadsheet newspaper. The white and black squares were minuscule and, instead of being constructed on a grid pattern, were a series of interconnected whorls and spirals. And the clues that had been completed were a succession of words connected with death, with dying and with decay.

And as their diseased, bubbling laughter began, Gilman finally bolted for the exit.

CHAPTER TEN

OUTSIDE IN THE twilight, beneath the feeble radiance cast by the dying electricity of the street-lamps, Gilman staggered around like a lunatic. He weaved from side to side across the roads, ignoring the slowmoving traffic, and chattered away deliriously to himself, repeating the same words over and over again.

"Stymm!" he muttered, "I'll get you Stymm!"

Up on Archway Bridge he could see a line of figures forming a queue. One by one, at an interval of a minute or so, each person clambered over the side of the iron parapet and fell to the motorway underneath. Their bodies splattered onto the tarmac; a great mass of crumpled flesh and broken bones had accumulated below the arch. Blood ran down the hill like a red stream. Yet it all seemed to happen in slow motion except at the moment of impact, when the sound reverberated with a stomach-churning squelch.

Gilman fell to his knees in front of the bridge, staring up at the distant figures preparing to make the jump. Many of them were dressed in patients' gowns, and he wondered whether they had left their ward beds and climbed halfway up Highgate Hill from the Whittington Hospital in order to reach this spot. Some had obviously already been mutilated or damaged, for a series of crutches, neck braces and filthy dressings were strewn amongst the corpses on the ground. All bore the stigmata of Necromorphic sigilisation.

And as he knelt there, was it the case that he could already detect the first stirrings of awakening in the cadaverous debris lying all around him? Certain limbs did indeed seem to be twitching, but whether in final death throes or at the beginning of reanimation, it was impossible to tell.

Above Gilman the horde came on, shuffling along the queue, their eyes already dead as they peeped over the edge of the ornate railing before they leapt. He got to his feet, stunned at the horror of it all, and had to clamber over a mound of carcasses to reach the other side of the arch. Without looking back, he hurtled down the wet, bloody pavement. A long line of cars with dim headlights had built up behind the corpsepile, and their ghoulish, smirking occupants appeared to view what was taking place on the bridge as if it were some movie being shown in a drive-in theatre.

As he got further away from the scene, Gilman saw that the pavement beneath his feet was cracked and sickly weeds had forced their way through the gaps. They were like no weeds he had seen before and were a noxious greyish-yellow colour. One of Gilman's trailing hands brushed against a projecting, hairy leaf that had sprung from a crevice on the side of the embankment. The contact caused an ugly, blister-dotted rash to form on his skin only a few moments afterwards. It became so irritating that he wrapped a handkerchief around the blemished area, lest he continually scratched it to a bloody mess in order to relieve the damnable itching.

Opposite Archway Underground Station, there was a dilapidated Routemaster bus that was waiting to pick up passengers on Junction Road. Its engine was idling over and there were already a few people aboard. Quite where Gilman was headed, he had no idea, but he knew he was not going back to the hell of his flat. There had to be someone else left besides himself who was horrified at the madness that had seeped into the world. Surely not everyone was enthralled in the hypnotic influence of the Necromorphs?

He climbed onto the conductor’s platform and made his way up the turn of the stairway to the top deck. The windows were broken and the curve of the ceiling was covered with the whorls and spirals he had come to know so well. Three passengers slumped in their seats, at angles that suggested exhaustion or unconsciousness, but their backs were to him so he wasn’t yet able to determine the exact reason.

“Please,” he thought. “Don’t let them all be…”

One of them, a woman, roused herself and turned around. He recognised her. It was his landlady Rebecca Brown.

She seemed to have been unaffected by the horrors seething all around her, and waved at Gilman in recognition. Her nervous mouth twitched with a smile as she beckoned him to take the seat alongside her.

Gilman was dumbstruck by her indifference. To her this seemed to be just another pleasant day, one in which she was simply going to enjoy a late afternoon journey on the top deck of the bus. She was dressed in a thin cotton floral dress, with a turquoise silk scarf wrapped high about her neck. She looked quite attractive. As he listened incredulously she began to babble all sorts of social pleasantries, asking how he was getting on at the flat, hoping that everything was to his liking, saying that he should not hesitate to advise her if he wanted any changes made and so on.

While she was talking, the bell sounded sharply twice and the bus moved off along Junction Road.

Had she been driven mad by the chaos? Was she now living in some fantasy world of her own where the world went on exactly as before? Gilman could understand how anyone's mind might crack under the strain of this monstrous upheaval in reality and retreat into itself …

He had to bring her to her senses; make her accept that all this was really happening and must be faced, not blanked out.

Looking through the shattered window, Gilman saw that they appeared to be travelling at normal speed. The rows of now decayed and weed-infested low buildings did not pass as if the bus were moving in slow motion. Instead, the effect had apparently been transferred to the outside, and what few pedestrians there were on the streets moved slowly and awkwardly like deep-sea divers on the ocean floor. Ahead he could see the dome-topped and elaborate Victorian structure on the corner opposite Tufnell Park Underground Station. It had become a façade; hollow except for the poisonous yellow vegetation that reached out greedily into the twilight.

"Look," Gilman said, interrupting Rebecca Brown's flow of nonsense, "can't you see what's going on? Are you blind? Can't you see that they are taking over everything? That soon there will be nothing of what we've known left?"

His voice rose to a feverish pitch and he jabbed his finger in the direction of the broken window, pointing to the nightmarish scene outside. Even as he spoke, a crowd of hobbling and stumbling revenants slowly spewed out of the shadowy exit from the Underground Station.

“Just commuters, nothing more,” she responded blandly, hardly taking any notice.

The bus rattled along the streets and Rebecca Brown gazed out at the passing view with a satisfied expression on her face. They had turned onto Brecknock Road and climbed the rise up over the metropolis. Gilman saw stucco and redbrick terraces, run down and decayed, the weeds crawling upwards over their exteriors like diseased vines. Through the windows, or at least through those that had not been boarded-up, he would occasionally glimpse a ghostly white face, before it retreated and was again swallowed up by the darkness within.

Looking backward over his shoulder at the sight retreating behind them, he could see the great hills overlooking north London. Whereas previously the vista was verdant and mingled with spires and domes, now the predominant colour was sickly yellow, and all the spires and domes were ruinous, broken structures; such a sight as may have been seen a hundred years after the temples and villas of ancient Rome had been sacked and mutilated by the barbarians.

Gilman hardly knew what to say to his fellow passenger. She seemed so unconcerned with the desolation that he himself saw, with mounting horror, had seeped into everything. Still she chattered on amiably: as if it were he that was experiencing some kind of frightening delusion, that he was the one to be humoured, not her.

Down York Way they passed, skirting the edges of that dim unconjectured region known as Barnsbury, and around the back of the depots and

wastelands that lay behind Kings Cross Railway Station.

Gilman was amazed and terrified when the bus drew alongside what had formerly been the disused Underground station York Road, that onetime stop on the Piccadilly Tube line between Kings Cross and the Caledonian Road. For the burgundy-tiled building was now in use and he saw that the padlocked boards and locked doorways had been broken open. Some pitiful-looking denizens milled around the place aimlessly, looking like survivors from a nuclear holocaust; their clothes ragged, their skins blackened and peeling.

They were by now trundling past Kings Cross Station, and had turned right along the Euston Road, heading west. The High Victorian spires and pinnacles of Sir Gilbert Scott's St. Pancras Hotel and Station reared up ahead of them. It was like a vision from one of Poe's nightmare tales: around the wreckage of the clocktower wheeled a black cloud of ravens. The hands on the face of the dial seemed to move widdershins, though in an inexorable fashion that could not be discerned without close concentration.

Unless he was mistaken he could glimpse more ghostly faces at the multitudinous shattered windows, peering into the eternal twilight, and they were gruesome and horrible faces without a semblance of humanity, faces that bore smiles devoid of feeling.

Rebecca Brown deviated from her monologue and said to Gilman:

"I do feel guilty, Mr. Gilman, I feel that I perhaps should have told you that the last person to occupy your flat did away with himself. It was rumoured

that he went mad. But there was no definitive verdict from the coroner. And I needed the money and was afraid that it might put you off the thought of taking the tenancy."

Gilman laughed. The woman was crazy. He asked the name of the person who had occupied the flat before him.

"His name? It was Mr. Stymm, I believe. Yes, I'm sure it was Stymm. Though you only have the top floor: he rented both floors, the first and second from me … I never met him myself, all our business was conducted through an estate agent."

As she spoke, she fiddled with the silk scarf and worked it down along her neck. Hidden under it was a wound that ran from ear to ear; a lurid purple gash that a Stanley Knife might make when dug into flesh.

The bus had traversed desolate Woburn Place and Southampton Row, their continuous line of hotels and businesses all abandoned and dead, like the central streets of a gigantic necropolis; a monstrous Imperial ghost-town, the heart of an Empire of Shadows. And at the bottom of Southampton Row there was a gateway open. It led to a black aperture in the distance whose tracks in the road descended into the depths of the earth. For some bizarre reason he was no longer sure whether he rode upon the top deck of an old Routemaster bus or whether he was aboard a tram, a vehicle hardly in use in London since way back in the fifties.

His attention having been entirely taken up with the ghoulish transformations he had seen around him, and with the garish throat wound

of Rebecca Brown, Gilman had paid little heed of the other passengers on the vehicle. But one of the travellers at the front of the deck now got to his feet, just as the gateway and tracks heaved into view, and made his way along the aisle. It was a short man with a shaven, scarred head: a man carrying an old-fashioned medical kit bag and clad in a grimy raincoat.

He winked ironically at Gilman as their gazes met.

It was Stymm.

And, leaving Rebecca Brown to continue with her own rambling discourse, now addressed to no-one in particular, Gilman got abruptly to his feet, just as the vehicle passed through the gateway and began to trundle downwards in the direction of the black aperture. He was only a few seconds behind the Necromorphic dream-scientist, who had jumped from the conductor's platform to the weed-choked pavement in one easy movement.

Gilman saw that the outlines of the vehicle wavered as it descended along the tracks, now travelling in slow-motion when viewed from the outside. At the conclusion of the journey it had completed its transformation into an electric tram powered by overhead cables that were caked with rust and hardly seemed to be in a fit condition to supply the necessary current.

Stymm was hurtling away along High Holborn, though only at walking pace, whereas Gilman had broken into a trot, despite which he never seemed to gain ground on his quarry.

All the buildings were riddled with cracks and infested with the vile yellow weeds, as if some plague affecting inanimate objects had struck concrete, steel and bricks overnight. The ornate Victorian fronts, with their half-pillars, arches and cornices, were a mass of peeling plasterwork and mildew. The shop windows were all broken, the merchandise behind them spilling onto the streets; Gilman was momentarily arrested by the sight of some headless dressmakers' dummies entwined by the sickly yellow weeds and clad in designer clothes. Cartons, boxes and other debris, mostly foodstuffs, blackened by rot, lay strewn across the pavement.

The pursuit was nightmarish. No matter how hard Gilman tried his limbs responded as if weighed down by lead. He simply could not close the distance between himself and Stymm. The scarred little man scuttled onwards, carrying his crumpled leather kit bag, occasionally looking over his shoulder so as to smirk at Gilman. They crossed the bottom of the Gray's Inn Road, past ruins that had once been Staples Inn. It seemed inevitable that Stymm turned onto Hatton Gardens, making his way across the road and into the little alley that led to the Sceptre Tavern.

As he followed, he saw that one of the jewellers' shop window displays was intact. But whereas it must once have been full of gold and precious stones, all it now contained were sickly weeds, some rusty trinkets and black objects that looked like lumps of coal. This was horrible enough, but was as nothing compared to the next business establishment: a TV showroom filled with banks of screens. None of the devices were up-to-date; all were apparently relics from the fifties, black and white sets with fuzzy pictures, valve-powered, with a control dial that one turned in order to tune into a particular frequency. Around the TV sets grew the tendrils of the omnipresent weeds, but they seemed to caress rather than invade the machines, as if protecting them in some weird form of syncretism. Although Gilman was by now steeled to the fact he expected to see another bewildering display of horrible images flashing on the screens, one after another, this time it was different. A single image was being broadcast; that

of a gigantic bleached eye, one which blinked only infrequently, as if solely to moisten its cornea.

Tearing himself away from its malignant gaze with a cry of anguish, Gilman followed after Stymm. His mind was filled with hate for the ugly little man and he was resolved to throttle out what undead life remained in him at any cost.

Black soot coated the ancient lamp-post that stood crookedly at the entrance to the alley leading to the Sceptre tavern. The soot also caked the brickwork of the twisted passageway. But if Gilman expected to find the pub to be nothing more than a blackened, burnt mass, its centuried timbers charred and the structure having fallen in on itself after a great conflagration, he was wrong. True, its angles looked awry, for the bow windows and small doorways into its two bars leant over crazily, like those in a carnival fun-house. It was as if the pub had been mentally reconstructed in the imagination of someone deranged and brought into existence as a parody of its former self. The weeds did not, however, touch it and the closest tendrils to its walls were withered and burnt. Drawing closer Gilman saw that the windows had been covered with sheets of yellowed notepaper, each page covered with the whorls and spirals that he so dreaded.

But Gilman’s desire to revenge himself upon Stymm pushed reluctance and fear to the back of his mind. He entered the saloon bar through the low, skewed doorway. The drinkers within were a motley crowd of rotten carcasses, diseased and stinking. Mercifully, the shadows concealed a great deal of the terror, for the interior was lit only by candlelight, but when Gilman caught the glance of one of the apparitions he had the awful sensation of looking into hollowness, for nothing lay behind the blank of its eyes. The things still supped, downing glasses of greenish, foul liquid and chattered lowly together in croaking voices. Their speech sounded curiously

archaic and one or two seemed even to be wearing dirty periwigs and tattered frock coats.

Turning left, Gilman saw two familiar figures sitting in the snuggery. Neither of them noticed his arrival. One was the burnt corpse of Derek Snape. He was writing furiously in a notebook, his brown claw moving the pen against the paper rapidly, and pasting the results onto the closest window, alongside all the other pages he'd already put up there.

Sitting opposite him was the Melissa Chang revenant. Her skin was pale as ivory though most of her face obscured by her long black hair. Gilman felt a sense of relief at not being able to see her heavy-lidded eyes.

Stymm himself was sitting on the far side of the room. He had his back to a wall-mirror and stared at Gilman. The scarred little man made no attempt to move, but simply sat there, glaring with malignity as if daring Gilman to act first. But as he advanced, with such an intensity of hatred that his heart raced, he felt his limbs becoming heavy and instead of lunging at Stymm, he found that he could only slump into the chair opposite him across the table. Some sort of hypnotic paralysis emanating from Stymm had taken possession of his body. After a while even his heartbeat began to slow down.

"You will perceive," said Stymm, "that it is you who are the alien here. I let you exist only because you amuse me Gilman. Rather like a curiosity I take out of my toy-box; a stupid relic of a world that has passed away, a Victorian Mister Punch glove-puppet."

“Bastard …” Gilman gurgled, his vocal cords struggling to articulate the words, “ … what gives you … the right to kill … to destroy? What … gives you … the right?”

“Destroy? Ah, Gilman, I am only one of many who creates and liberates! This IS the world. Don’t you understand yet? The world is being dreamed and written back into reality. We are not the dead, Gilman, it is you and your kind who are the dead now.”

“You’d like … to think that … wouldn’t you? That you’re not all … murderers.”

“We must act in a fashion that you with your illusory human values might consider ruthless. The world you held together with your dreams, its structure a complex web of imagination, has to be torn down so that we can get through. We left intimations in your memories in order to prepare for our coming. All those nightmares, do you think they had no purpose? And the thoughts of those you shut up or ignored, the ones you called mad, why didn’t you heed their words? There were always clues in the interstices.”

Stymm leant forward, his scarred skull glistening with rivulets of sweat that gave off a foul odour. His lips curled into a sardonic smile, and a thin, ulcer-covered tongue was momentarily visible. With a gruesome snigger, he opened his crumpled leather bag and drew out a needle-gun. It was the first time that Gilman had seen one so close-up. Its tapering barrel ended in an infinitely sharp point and in front of the handle was a small cylinder containing the ink injected beneath the outer layer of a victim’s skin.

“Do you know what this is?” Stymm said.

Gilman could only grunt by way of a response.

“Then I’ll tell you. This is simply one means of spreading the true Word. Knowledge is power and symbols are our weapons. Accept that the war is over, Gilman, and that your side has lost. There is nothing else for you to do anymore. If you really want to know it all then connect that book you bought, the one you can’t bring yourself to read, to your computer. Do as I say and stop trying to resist the inevitable.”

Stymm made a curious motion with his hand, and Gilman’s head dropped forward onto the table as if he were drunk and insensible. Though he struggled to regain control of himself it was several minutes before he properly came to, and by then Stymm was long gone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PEERING AROUND INTO the semi-darkness in search of Stymm, Gilman saw Melissa Chang crossing the room, cat-like, in his direction. That face that he dreaded to look upon was now visible, though only periodically as she passed through one of the pools of candlelight which illuminated the interior of the Sceptre Tavern. Her skin was deathly white, but seemed to bear no trace of decay or mutilation. The heavylidded, crescent eyes that once had filled him with dread now seemed somehow alluring as if a devilish magic was at work within them. He thought of twin, featureless moons shining in an empty night-sky.

He wondered whether Stymm might not have influenced his mind, for although his instinct was to flee at her approach he instead stood up in a gesture of greeting. How ridiculous, he thought, amidst this charnel house filled with the bodies and stench of the living dead, that he was behaving in such a fashion!

“Gilman,” she whispered. “So it is you, I thought it might be, but couldn’t be sure, so much has changed since …”

She let the sentence hang in the air.

Gilman got to his feet and made his way through the crowd of shadowy and rotten revenants to the bar, accompanied by Chang. What is this madness, his mind asked him with every step he took, what do you think you’re

doing? As he stood there, he reached into his pocket, drew out his tobacco pouch and papers, and began to roll a cigarette. It was awkward since his left hand was bandaged in his handkerchief. Was he trying to emulate Rebecca Brown and pretend to himself that nothing had changed and that the world went on as before? The well-practised ritual of rolling the tobacco and papers into a thin tube, of standing at the bar, with a ten-pound note on the counter indicating that he wished to be served: he'd done these things a thousand times in the old world. Did he hope that by repeating such actions all would become as it was back then?

After several drags on his smoke, the acrid taste in his mouth wasn't as bad. It was true that the menthol filters he'd inserted undoubtedly helped, but it seemed that even the underlying flavour (as if the tobacco were dried-up) scarcely bothered him. What, he wondered, would he make of the drink? For now the landlord was right in front of him and pouring a measure of the sickly green fluid into a glass so that Gilman might drink the filmy, scum covered stuff.

The man's bald head was caked with sores, and the ash-coloured hair that hung lankly down to his shoulders bore evidence of charring. He fumbled around with the glass, spilling some of it. His rheumy, sunken eyes were nearly sightless.

"Lovely drink that," he groaned, sliding the glass across the counter across to Gilman, "delicious."

The stench alone advised Gilman otherwise, but in his strange desire to recapture some element of normalcy, to indulge again in whatever reminder of his past he could, he brought the glass up to his lips and swallowed a mouthful. At first he thought he was going to choke it straight back up. His

throat seemed to narrow against the noxious fluid. Yet he managed to get it down. This, he thought, must be what it's like to drink someone else's urine after losing a stupid bet. Was this all there was left to him, he wondered, was this the only way to get mercifully drunk in Necromorphic land?

Beside him, Chang was smiling, whether with irony or not he was unable to say. But though he was minded to overlook her expression, he found it impossible to ignore the now-black teeth that nestled in her gums. Still, she seemed to be in much better shape than the other carcasses that haunted this place. Her own drink was in a small, fluted glass, and she sipped at it like a bird.

Having managed to keep down the liquid he'd swallowed, Gilman found that, to his relief, it retained its potency. Though he was nowhere near being relaxed, nevertheless a measure of alcoholic numbness had begun to enter into his perception of the world, as if he were observing a nightmare rather than participating in it directly.

Perhaps, he realised, if he could not obtain any sense about what was happening from the likes of Stymm, Kate Collins or Rebecca Brown, all of whom seemed intent on tormenting him with falsehoods and riddles, he could glean something from Chang. Looking at her face more closely he speculated whether the deathly whiteness of her complexion might be a consequence of heavy make-up. Certainly he was struck, now, by her resemblance to a china-doll. Death, he knew, did not usually produce such a colour. As the vessels underneath the flesh drain of blood, skin turns to its actual colour; jaundiced, not pale.

"Charles," she said, looking Gilman full in the eyes, "was never able to fully satisfy me. You know?"

Distasteful, thought Gilman. The drink had made him slightly lightheaded. What the hell was this anyway? Was she coming on to him? Why would Necromorphs have any interest in flirtation? Perhaps, he thought, the transition wasn't as faultless as they expected, and trace memories and habits from their former lives lingered on in their dead brains. Stronger in some than in others, and more difficult to shake off. He resolved to steer the conversation back in the direction he wanted it to take, and not indulge in Chang's flirtation game. If he had momentarily been tricked into playing it by the effect the alcohol had upon him, the noise of her laboured, mechanical breathing dispelled the illusion that she was amongst the living. The fact was that, like all the other Necromorphs, underneath her make-up, she was repellent and decaying.

"You're not really Melissa, are you?" he said. "Just something that's taken over her form. I'd like to learn more about what you want. Why you're doing this: not all of you can be indifferent to the havoc you've wrought."

"Oh no," she responded. "None of us are indifferent. But you should know better than anyone that this is how it's always been and how it always will be. Why ask me such stupid questions?"

Gilman drew on his cigarette. Perhaps these things really had no idea that there had been a world here before they came, a different world entirely whose inhabitants were not always in a state of dying or of death.

The weird smile reappeared on Chang's face. Lines appeared across the skin, like cracks in a sheet of ice.

“You know you’re very funny,” she said. “Muttering to yourself all the time.”

Gilman had no clue what she was talking about. His left hand began to itch unbearably and he rubbed its palm against the side of his hip. Of how much value was it to try and question one of these things and expect to get a straight answer? Probably none at all.

“I don’t do that,” he said after taking another swig of his drink. “That’s nonsense.” For some reason, he felt enraged at the suggestion.

“Oh but darling, you do! Before I came over you were sitting alone and … ”

“You didn’t see Stymm?” Gilman fairly spat out the words at her. Several corpse-heads turned lethargically in their direction at his raised voice.

“Stymm?” she replied, echoing Kate Collins amusement at the subject. “Oh this is another of your jokes I suppose. Very funny. Ha! Ha! Ha!”

What was it about her? Was she determined to make him angry? Her screeching laughter sparked off all the other revenants in the bar of the Sceptre. Now they were all at it, enjoying some in-joke at Gilman’s expense. Some of them even pointed at him, in between their hollow, breathless guffawing.

As he surveyed the monstrous, candlelit spectacle around him, Gilman caught sight of two large worm-like creatures writhing on the floor and brushing against her ankles. At first glance the things appeared to be bloated white snakes, though their heads ended in five stumpy digits. It was only when he looked closer and saw the ginger hair covering them that he realised exactly what they were.

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Gilman had then got royally drunk. He'd even joined in with the laughter at one point, though he didn't know why. Chang had drifted back into the crowd, someone else having taken her fancy and the writhing limbs accompanied her, trailing afterwards like familiars.

He'd been swept up in some monstrous bacchanal of the dead, and the filthy liquor he drank no longer seemed unpleasant at all. Why, he thought, if it's always twilight then I can drink forever and ever! What does it matter to discover the secret of the Necromorphs? Who cares what happens to the world? Who cares about anything?

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After that everything was a blur.

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When he awoke it was still twilight and he was somewhere else, outside, the smell of soil filling his nostrils. His eyes flickered open as consciousness returned and he grimaced at the prospect of the mother of all hangovers he was about to experience. But there was no hangover. Only that damnable itching in his left hand. All around him was the horrible yellowish vegetation, but between the folds of leaves and vines was a multitude of gravestones.

Gilman was sprawled close to a pathway, his body twisted at an angle so that his head was leaning on a slab covering a family vault, while his legs were tangled in something resembling a briar-bush. The plant bore that weird, alien quality that all vegetation now seemed to possess. Once Gilman had drawn himself upright into a sitting position, he saw that the necropolis was located on the side of a steep hill.

Although at first bewildered, he quickly realised that he had somehow staggered into the old West section of Highgate Cemetery after last night's debauch. At the back of his mind, he wondered whether his revels with the dead had led him to conclude, with perverse drunken logic, that he might as well make his home amongst them.

Clambering onto his feet and stepping off the stone slab of the vault, he saw that his clothes were soiled, with numerous frayed holes. It appeared that he had crawled across the grounds of the cemetery on his hands and knees before collapsing at this spot. There were abrasions on his hands, the cuts ringed with dirt. Although he expected these to smart, they did not do so and this fact, coupled with his lack of a hangover, mystified him. The only pain he felt was in his left hand, underneath the now stained and pus-encrusted handkerchief. It felt horribly inflamed as if the skin there were ready to erupt.

He unwound the cloth covering his hand. The skin on the back was riddled with weeping pustules. When he flexed his fingers the diseased yellow discharge dribbled like tears out of the sores. This action actually provided welcome relief, for the worst of the itching stopped once the poison was expelled.

Gilman began to walk along the pathway until he reached the stairs leading to the Lebanon Avenue, that sunken, circular series of vaults open to the sky. As he made his way down he noticed that all of the names and dates carved into the gravestones he'd passed, and those here above the doors of the tombs and vaults, had disappeared as if they had never existed. And he wondered whether the mouldy coffins within were also devoid of remains. The thought gnawed at his brain and he was compelled to find out the answer.

Fallen leaves, all yellowish-brown, choked the passageways. One of the bricked-up entrances to the tombs had only lately crumbled away, providing a space just wide enough to creep through. Gilman's experiences with the Necromorphs had largely dispelled any horror he might have otherwise felt at the prospect of coming into close contact with the dead and he entered the charnel-house with scarcely a pang of nerves. Inside it was dark, the twilight outside hardly penetrating deeply into the nitre-covered vault. Gilman took his cigarette lighter out of his pocket and, cupping the tenuous flame against stray draughts of air, gazed around him. On the far wall at the back were two shelves, one at chest-height and the other at knee-height, on which rested rotten coffins caked with white lichen. They seemed to have been undisturbed during all that time, gradually decaying in the darkness.

He wandered across to the coffin at chest-height. Momentarily extinguishing the lighter, so as to free both his hands and remove the lid, he

found that it was easy to shift, the long nails having little purchase upon the corroded planks of wood into which they'd been hammered many years hence. Once he'd got the cover off and laid it vertically alongside the shelf, he retrieved his lighter and sparked it into life.

Inside was a horribly decayed corpse. Despite the enormous passage of time the skeletal remains had not been given over to total dissolution but seemed to have somehow avoided returning to dust. The body was contorted, as if it had struggled futilely for release within the confines of the coffin after its interment. Lengthy masses of dark grey hair reached over its shoulders, and it bore elongated, sharp fingernails. Both appeared to have continued growing whilst the thing was shut up in the tomb. As Gilman passed the flickering flame over the sight he saw that a thin caul of yellowish mould covered its face like a terrible mask. And upon this sickening growth was the stigmata of Necromorphic sigilisation.

Gilman scrutinised the characters and saw that they did not appear to have been etched into the graveyard mould, but rather seemed to have formed spontaneously, with no outside agency being involved. Was this, then, one of those beings whose dreams had formed the parody-world around him? A bona-fide Necromorph in its original state awaiting entry into waking consciousness in order to take possession of a fresh corpse: one more capable of functioning than the feeble husk in which it was currently imprisoned? And rather than visualising a cemetery full of empty graves and tombs, Gilman now imagined a gigantic army of dead dreamers below ground, not only in this cemetery but in every burial ground, whose nightmares reached out to change the structure of reality forever. For the power of their visions was such that it not only affected the present; it also obliterated the past and future.

He stumbled backwards away from the sight, through the crumbling hole in the bricked-up entrance, and into the twilight outside. Towering over the

circular series of vaults was a gigantic plane tree whose horizontal branches fanned out across the sunken passageways. It was choked with yellow vines and creepers that had grown out of the ground at its base. The alien vegetation appeared to be engaged in an attempt to tear the old tree down for it wound about the trunk and the branches like the curls of a monstrous python.

Gilman had no idea how he managed to gain access to the west part of the cemetery in the first place – the gates were always closed to the best of his knowledge – and high walls deterred all but the most determined of trespassers. As he made his way along the path he noted that the obliteration of the names and dates on the funereal monuments was not an isolated phenomenon but was universal. The only means of guessing at the apparent age of a mausoleum, tomb or gravestone was by the degree of deterioration it had suffered. He supposed that most of the older structures had lost their personal details anyway, though he would have expected the odd letter or number to be visible here and there. But it seemed that some force had annihilated any record of those entombed here, wiping out such information, as if the dead had not ended their lives but were rather waiting to be born.

A sighing wind rustled the leaves sprouting from the multitude of deformed trees. As he reached the terrace just below St. Michael’s church, its spire now ruinous and stark against the twilit sky, Gilman sat down and searched his pockets. His pouch of tobacco, cigarette papers and filters were still there and he rolled himself a cigarette while he tried to think about what might be the best course of action for him to follow next.

Doubtless he had either failed to get back to his flat on Archway Road, or had decided against going back there as a consequence of Kate Collins’ malefic presence. The memory of that single white eye gazing horribly at him from the bank of TV screens filled him with dread. And as he smoked,

his gaze roved across the expanse all around, over the confusion of ornate tombs, headstones, crosses and the stone angels whose faces were turned to the skies. Just beyond the tops of the trees, lying further east from the church spire, was a television mast. It rose imperiously, perched upon the heights of the hill, its skeletal framework visible for untold miles. He could not help thinking of the similarity between the ultimate aim of the two constructs, the spire and the mast.

Whereas one would ring out with the clamour of bells each Sunday calling the dying or the desperate to hear of the Spirit, the other broadcast images and sounds promoting nothing less than a dreadful shamexistence of materialism. Although the former now seemed redundant, the latter, the TV mast, had taken on a hideous new significance. The Necromorphs employed this technology for their own purposes; not only to spy upon those not given over to their ruthless dominance but also to transmit (now Gilman realised it!) their very thought-patterns. The broadcasts contained the telepathic dreams of the dead, conceived outside space and time, beneath the caul-mould.

As he smoked the cigarette he'd rolled, Gilman noticed that his scalp was crawling with head lice. One of the insects had crawled down the nape of his neck and he caught it between his forefinger and thumb. Doubtless he had picked up the infestation whilst crawling through the soil on his way to the part of the necropolis in which he'd collapsed.

He walked along one of the pathways until he came to a gate in the graveyard at the north end of Swain's Lane. There was no padlock in place to keep out intruders, and the iron trellis was ajar. Perhaps, Gilman thought, he'd entered by the selfsame route during his drunken state hours before.

Gilman departed from the cemetery, turned left and eventually found his way onto Highgate Hill. He headed south towards Cromwell Avenue and descended towards the depths of Archway Road. Where once he would have expected to hear the roar of the A1 road traffic sounding in the close distance, now he heard only a gaunt sound, like waves breaking on a distant shoreline. There were no vehicles moving on the cracked and weed-infested dual carriageway. What cars he saw were just empty shells, discarded on the kerbs, their doors left open. It appeared that to drive anywhere was either no longer necessary or had become impossible. But still the traffic lights turned from green to red and back again, though there was nothing there to control.

He saw shadowy figures lurking in the Rochester Pub, but kept to the other side of the street before crossing over directly in front of his own building.

The front door was hanging off its hinges and a line of yellowish plants had sprung up overnight from the kerb, along the hallway, and up the first flight of stairs. It looked as if the weeds had actually forced their way inside. He had to wade through the knee-high stems and leaves, making sure that no exposed skin came into contact with them.

As his footfalls sounded on the stairway, he heard muffled thumps by way of response coming from the corridor leading to Stymm's old flat as the Kate Collins revenant threw herself back and forth against the door. Her voice was even ghastlier than ever and Gilman could only imagine how ravaged and nightmarish her carcass had become.

"You've come back darling …" she burbled madly, "… I knew you wouldn't leave me like this … I knew you'd come back … I knew you'd come back to me …"

Gilman covered his ears with the palms of his hands and tried to blot out the sound of her voice. He sprinted up the final flight of stairs to his flat, unlocked the door and slammed it shut behind him. This further rejection seemed to send the Kate Collins revenant into a fury and through the floorboards he heard the deadened sound of her throwing herself frustratedly against the walls.

Next to Gilman's foldaway camp bed was a leather medical bag that he recognised immediately as belonging to Stymm. Checking the only other room in the flat, the combined bathroom with the toilet closet, he found no sign of the Necromorph. If he had been in here, he was now long gone. It was difficult to see how he could have been absent-minded enough to have left his bag containing the tools of his hideous trade behind, but that was what he'd appeared to do.

Gilman opened the bag and rummaged around inside amongst the photographs, the needle-gun and assorted paraphernalia. As he did so he scratched furiously at his madly itching scalp, dislodging a few of the lice that had nestled there. The squirming insects fell to the carpet and tried to burrow into the depths, as if mistaking it for another scalp and searching for the nourishment buried beneath. Gilman stood up and crushed the things under his heel, twisting his foot into them. As he did so, his gaze fell upon one of the photographs that he'd moved to the top of the pile in the bag as he'd shuffled around inside it. Gilman took hold of the snap and was staggered by what he saw.

It was the photograph that he'd taken of Stymm assaulting Melissa Chang. But whereas she was clearly visible, sprawled facedown on the blood-soaked bed, Stymm was nowhere to be seen. Gilman was certain that he had taken a photo of them both, and, in any case, how the hell had it come into

the possession of the Necromorph in the first place? The thing was insane, impossible.

Gilman clawed again at his scalp, drawing blood this time, and catching one of the lice between his fingers. He squeezed the creature until it was an indistinguishable mass, and wiped the remains into the crusty handkerchief in his pocket. Oddly though, despite having torn the skin around the crown of his head, he felt no pain, only the damnable irritation that was even driving out thoughts of how Stymm had managed to acquire the photograph.

There was no other solution. He had to stop the itching before it drove him crazy. Gilman went into the bathroom and, standing in front of the mirror above the sink, began to hack off all his hair with a pair of scissors. The basin gradually filled with his shorn locks and dozens of the wriggling bloodsuckers. Once he had cut as close as he was able with the twin blades of the scissors he flushed away the contents of the basin down the toilet. The water from the cistern that carried away the hair and lice was, he saw, quite stagnant.

Stubble remained on his scalp that the scissors could not remove and Gilman worked over his skull with a razor. As he did so, he was horrified at uncovering a score of scars that criss-crossed his flesh. The accident, he thought – the accident on Tottenham Court Road when I was run down by that car – that's what must have caused them. But when he looked again into the mirror, he knew at last that the truth was otherwise; for it was clearly the face of the man he'd called Stymm that gazed back at him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NOTHING COULD HAVE surpassed the shock that Gilman felt at seeing Stymm's face staring back at him in the mirror. He'd run his fingers over his mouth, nose, forehead and cheeks, to verify by touch that the features he saw reflected were indeed his own. Only his eyes seemed to belong to him.

He recalled his meetings with Stymm and realised that no-one beside himself had acknowledged the Necromorph's presence or even spoken to him. Was it the case then that all along it was Gilman's features that had been hallucinatory, not Stymm's? The thought was nightmarish but inescapable. He and Stymm were the same person.

Kate Collins' insistence that she wanted to be taken into the flat below when she'd returned to the building. Now it all made sense. Two souls in one body, and Gilman had blood on his hands. How many people had he killed, or "restored"? Did he have any identity at all apart from the Stymm element?

Had everything that he'd worked on in the past, or what he thought was the past, been as nothing? His writings never written, his pain and joy just dreams that Stymm had dreamed. The only other possibility was that suggested by Dr Zadek in the talk he'd given during his demonstration in the hospital and in the TV broadcasts he'd seen; humanity was merely trace memories, psychic residue in brains occupied by an outside intelligence. Perhaps there was no truth at the heart of all this, for hadn't Kate Collins said that she was always the way she was, and presumably the same applied to Gilman. Maybe he had always been Stymm. No, that he could not, or

would not, accept. What was it that Stymm had said to him in the Sceptre Tavern? The words came back to him like an echo.

“If you really want to know it all then connect that book you bought, the one you can’t bring yourself to read, to your computer. Do as I say and stop trying to resist the inevitable.”

Gilman was not sure whether his computer would even work. The power supply was still weak, like the twilight outside – as if drained of most of its energy. The lichen-covered octavo book he’d tossed aside lay where it had fallen next to the monitor. He picked it up. Connect it to the machine? The thing was a book, not a piece of hardware, not electronic. How was he supposed to connect it to the machine? Madness!

Nevertheless, Gilman unscrewed the casing of the computer. It’s the hard-drive you need to replace, the voice whispered in his brain, take it out and put in the book.

He had built this machine himself from the required components. It was a simple matter for him to remove the hard-drive. What he was doing was ridiculous but still the voice inside his head commanded:

Now connect the cables from the motherboard to the book! Watch it flower!

Though he managed somehow to place the book securely inside the computer’s internal framework, Gilman had no idea how to attach the data transfer cables to it. After all, the thing had of course no damn sockets! But

as he puzzled over the matter, the appearance of the cables altered and rather than being composed of plastic and wire, they became like tendrils or vines. They attached themselves to the lichen-riddled front boards of the volume at one end, whilst the motherboard at the other degenerated from circuits and silicon chips into a slimy organic mass that pulsed with an abnormal life of its own.

After he'd screwed back the outer casing into place, he hit the "on" button. Nothing happened. He pushed the button again. There was a weird noise from inside the machine, not the whirring of a cooling fan, but the sound of pages being rapidly flicked back and forth.

And then, with an eerie green glow, the monitor lit up.

What appeared on the screen was a series of jumbled words and symbols, not written left to right, but in spirals that tapered in and out of one another. The text was phosphorescent, starkly contrasting with the black space behind it. The spirals were seen partially, in one edge of a loop, and it was only by scrolling along single lines that the complete pattern emerged. The further Gilman got into the coils, the greater became his unease. At first he was inclined to think that the shock of having apparently had Stymm's face grafted onto his own had finally destroyed any shred of rationality left in his brain. For here and there, as he made progress, the data assumed an aspect of compelling familiarity.

The sound of pages being turned inside the machine got faster and faster as he read. Finally, he got up from the computer and made his way into the toilet. He climbed up to the little box room above the ledge, the one he used for storage space, and retrieved the plastic bag containing the folder he'd

stashed there some time ago. Inside were the exhaustive series of notes he'd prepared relating to his third novel Insanity Laughs.

Gilman tipped the notes out of the folder onto the floor randomly. The pages fell this way and that, but as it emptied, he saw that a spiral pattern had formed. And when he bent down to examine the shape, he realised that it resembled what was displayed on the computer screen. Moreover, it was not just the pattern that was similar. Whereas here, written down in ink, were the outlines and stray ideas that he hoped to fuse together, the text on the monitor was nothing less than the culmination of those hints, the very novel that he was trying to finish.

But the book, he now realised, was impossible for any human being to have completed: a lucid account of madness, bearing all the weird logic of lunacy and the ineffable secrets that rationality obscures.

Gilman went back to the computer and worked his way through the coiling text. Somewhere in the middle the author's name appeared. He made reference to himself with a flourish of self-loathing, damning himself for being the perpetrator of the accursed composition, and his name was Conrad Stymm.

Looking over his shoulder at the papers scattered on the carpet, Gilman could not see them as anything other than a shadow cast by the magnum opus Stymm had created. It was this complete work that invested Gilman's crapulous notes and hints with significance. His own broken and near-sighted attempt had been doomed to failure.

The noise that the Kate Collins' revenant made as she threw herself against the walls below continued unabated and the floor in Gilman's flat trembled with each impact. It was as if someone was beating randomly on a huge drum.

He passed his mottled hand over his brow, wiping away the sweat that dribbled down his scarred, ugly flesh. He could not be Stymm, Gilman thought. He could not have visited the mutilation and death on the thing flailing around a storey below. And yet hadn't he bludgeoned her when he felt his own survival was at stake? Perhaps he was capable of worse horrors. And what of Rebecca Brown's comment about Stymm; that the man had gone mad and done away with himself? If time itself were breaking down and the Necromorphs, bending it to their own will, then the endless twilight, the diseased weeds and the dead walking the streets were all evidence of their dominion.

You still don't get it, do you? That nagging voice in his head murmured. You won't accept that it's the old world that's illusory.

It is you who are the alien here and I let you exist only because your antics amuse me.

Ж

Gilman had drunk the last of the bitter absinthe. He lay prostrate on the carpeted floor listening to the noise made by the Kate Collins' thing below. Its once frantic movements now sounded feebler, as if it either had tired or was resigning itself to imprisonment. He was trying to drive the invading

thoughts of Stymm from his brain, but could not succeed in blanking them out. He felt drawn to the mirror in the bathroom, and would stare into its depths, watching with a sickening fascination as the responses were formed on lips that were not his own but those of the Necromorph.

What it told Gilman he must do to Kate Collins' rotting form filled him with loathing, but he knew that the only way to silence the voice was to accede to the demands it made. Over and over it spoke of what it wanted him to do and reminded him that Gilman was only a puppet anyway.

Desperately looking for something to distract his tormented mind, he turned on the old black and white television set. Though the power seemed half-drained and he harboured the same doubts when trying to figure out whether there was enough of an electrical supply to operate the computer, the TV set flickered into life at once. Where might the broadcasts originate now, he wondered, the Alexandra Palace Transmitter, the mast on the hill overlooking Highgate Cemetery or straight out of his damaged psyche? A burst of grainy static flooded the screen and then coalesced into a visible picture. Gilman was initially relieved that it was not the gigantic staring eye of Kate Collins' that appeared. Instead what he saw was another series of nightmarish images.

The interior of an abandoned office, with close-ups of lingering depressions in the carpet that indicated where furniture had once stood; abnormally long fingers playing the black and white keys of a gutted and silent grand piano; a series of street lamps emitting pools of darkness in the stark noonday sun; a face swathed in bandages with tendrils hanging out of the eye-holes; a spiral stairwell whose steps descended infinitely; a motorway covered with millions of cockroaches clicking and whirring as they crawled over the remains of burnt-out vehicles and debris.

Momentarily, Kate Collins' gigantic single eye, blinking as if solely to moisten itself …

A scan of a tumour-riddled brain superimposed over a street-map of an unrecognisable metropolis with innumerable canals; a mass of black hair spouting between the cracks of a gigantic ice-plateau; a drained outdoor swimming pool choked with discarded television sets, the rotting bodies of dead celebrities with rictus smiles, Leonardo Da Vinci's Golden Rectangle, and the spiral of human D.N.A.

Again, Kate Collins' gigantic bleached eye, but this time the image flashed back and forth between it and another one; an open mouth illuminated by a spotlight and surrounded by total darkness. Its teeth were caked with dry blood. From deep within its throat there issued a grinding voice, a command directed at Gilman himself:

"Feed," it said, with his own voice though horribly distorted, "Feed your dreams."

Back to the watching eye, then forward to the mouth uttering its instruction, the eye, the mouth, repeated over and over again.

Downstairs Kate Collins began to thrash around violently once more, as if she were drawing on the last reserves of strength left in her rotting carcass.

Gilman went over to the television set and hit the "off" switch. The device stayed on.

“Feed your dreams.”

Then he went to the wall socket and tore out the plug. Still it stayed on.

“Feed your dreams.”

And now the sound seemed not only to come from the TV, but also from inside his own head.

Ж

When Gilman opened the door to the hall the sight of the yellow weeds having infiltrated all the way up the stairs confronted him. In their wake the wallpaper was thick with a gangrenous moss, and it peeled away from the concrete like flaps of torn skin. The whole place might have been abandoned and left to decay for years.

He crept down the steps towards the first floor with a vacant smile and blank stare that rendered his expression lifeless, and similar to that of a mannequin. Beneath his feet the boards creaked and he took care to avoid those which had only very recently fallen away altogether. In his mottled left hand he clutched a claw hammer.

During the descent the noise of Kate Collins' revenant crashing against the door of the flat below reached a deafening crescendo.

Like a sleepwalker, Gilman made his way along the corridor, wading through the knee-high weeds that lay in his path. Using the back of the claw hammer as a lever, he began to draw the nails out of the door and the wooden frame surrounding it, one after the other. The portal rocked as the cadaver buffeted itself against the obstruction, until finally it understood that its efforts to escape were now superfluous.

Once the last nail was removed Gilman kicked open the door and beheld the sight of the awful thing that he had imprisoned. It – she – stood there, at a lop-sided angle, with much of the flesh on her shoulders, arms and hands stripped away. Her gigantic single white eye gazed at him from out of unrecognisable features masked by decay. It was impossible to interpret the expression on her face. Too much was wreathed in shadow and putrefaction.

The twilight that filtered through the single window onto one of the walls of the flat showed it to be smeared with blood where she had vainly clawed and torn at the surface.

"Tell me who I am," he said.

There was no response, save for the rasping sound of her laboured breathing.

“Am I Ivan Gilman?” he asked, his voice uttering the words in a dull monotone.

The ravaged monstrosity jerked backwards and sat down in a corner of the room. She hunched over like a puppet whose strings had been cut, and a wheezing hiss issued from the back of her throat in response to the question.

“You idiot,” she gasped. “Gilman has been dead for a long time.”

From its ruined lips came a low chuckle.

Gilman gazed down at the claw-hammer he was still holding in his mottled left hand. But why the left, when he was right-handed?

Still the huge white eye glared at him.

He took a step forward and brandished the claw hammer just above his shoulder. Then again and again he struck at the skull and face of the monstrosity that continued to giggle hellishly at his expense. Only when there was nothing left of its head but a sickening bloody mass did he drop the hammer and stumble away from the still-animate torso and limbs that crawled blindly around the room. Instinctively, the remains were tracing a spiral pattern in the thick dust.

Ж

Gilman stood naked in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door in his flat. He looked over his wiry, diminutive body and grotesquely scarred head with disdain. Only moments earlier he'd opened Stymm's leather medical bag and taken out the tattooist's needlegun inside. The device was now cradled in his left hand.

With a grunt, he sat down on the edge of the bath and toyed with the gun. Its needle flickered rapidly in and out of the barrel. Only when he concentrated on it did the thing operate. If his attention wandered, the action stopped at once. Perhaps it was powered by alpha-waves from the brain, or some other kind of weak electromagnetic force peculiar to Necromorphs. He felt that he should know but the details didn't seem that important.

Feed your dreams, said the voice inside his head, feed them now. And as he heard the words there came to him a great vision of whorls, loops, coils and spirals all intertwined; a pattern more complex than he thought possible. What was essential was that he captured that vision: that he made some permanent record of it, before it disappeared forever. Those symbols were, he felt, more important than anything else. His own body was the perfect canvas.

And so Gilman began to write with the needle-gun upon his bare flesh and reproduce the pattern. He had to concentrate furiously, starting with his feet and then working his way up and round his legs, determined not to overlook even its tiniest detail.

By the time he'd reached his chest he understood that he was sigilising his own form, as if he were a victim of the Necromorphs. But he couldn't stop himself from carrying on and the needle-gun traced its way ever upward, past his neck, driven by the unyielding grasp of his mottled left hand.

From outside the doorway he heard the hissing crackle of static issued by the permanently turned-on television set in the main room. The voice had gone, and within his head the voice commanding him to follow its instructions had fallen silent at last.

Ж

There is no traffic on the Archway Road. The pavements and the duallane carriageway are choked with the noxious yellow weeds; they have grown chest-high and a sickly-sweet fragrance fills the air. Amongst the vegetation there are things crawling around, winding their way through the undergrowth on their rotting hands and knees. They move in a circular pattern, their progress discernible only by the rustling of the stems and leaves they disturb. All the buildings are now ruinous, empty shells occupied by the weeds. Most of the roofs have caved in and the windows are black rectangles with only shards of broken glass remaining in the frames.

The view south in the distance, beneath the arch of the bridge, is a panorama of the metropolis. The skyscrapers of the city are mottled with lichen, and like gigantic vertical crypts or catacombs in which the dead never sleep but only dream. The dome of St Paul's is riddled with titanic fissures. The grey and dismal twilight persists as if a funeral shroud now obscured reality from the gaze of mourners.

There is a long rope hanging off the edge of the Archway Bridge and a suspended body at the end of it swings slowly back and forth underneath the girders. The carcass hangs there by its broken, twisted neck. Its flesh is riddled with sigils and there is a nightmarish expression of horror on its face. The head of the corpse is shaven and covered with scars.

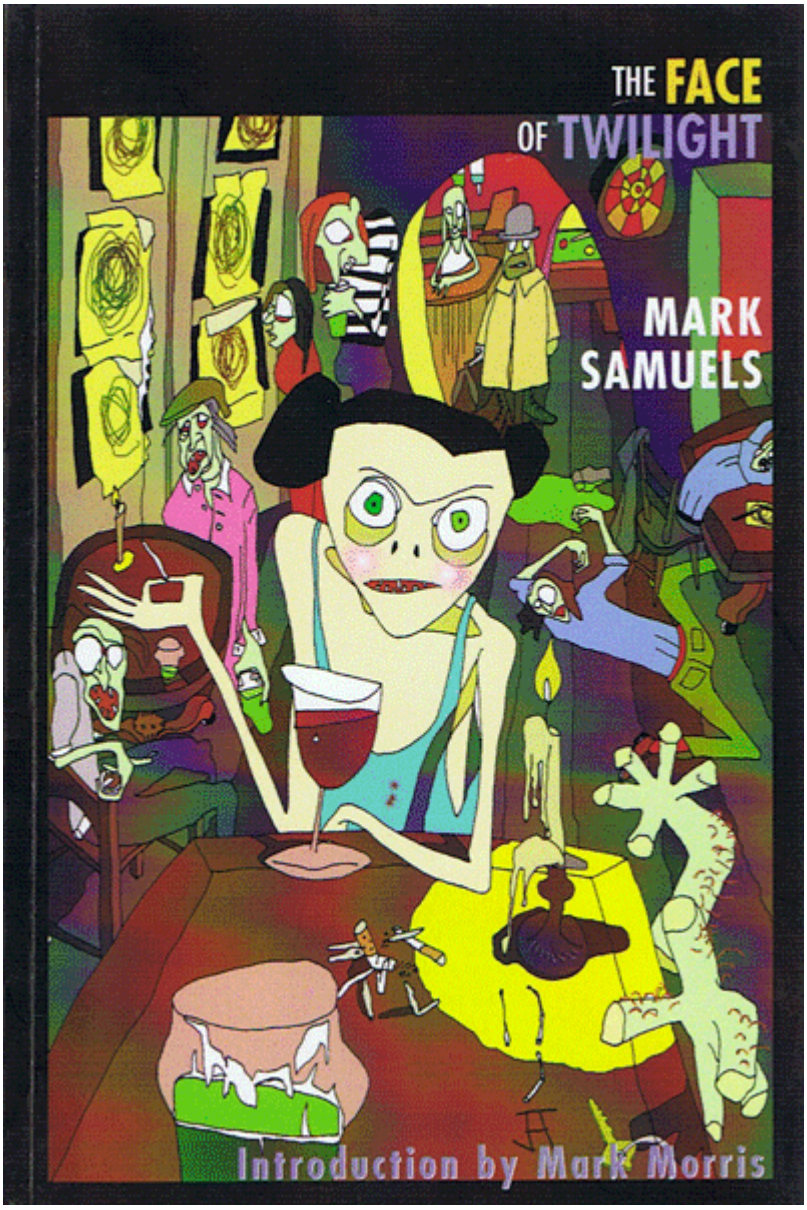
After a while the sigils fade away, as if written in invisible ink and the body twitches like an electric shock has passed through its nervous system. Finally, it opens its eyes.

They are wholly white.

And then it screams.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Samuels is the author of five short story collections; *The White Hands and Other Weird Tales* (Tartarus Press 2003), *Black Altars* (Rainfall Books 2003), *Glyphotech & Other Macabre Processes* (PS Publishing 2008), *The Man who Collected Machen & Other Stories* (Chomu Press 2011) and *Written In Darkness* (Egaeus Press 2014) as well as the author of the novel *The Face of Twilight* (PS Publishing 2006). His tales have appeared in many prestigious anthologies on both sides of the Atlantic including *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror, Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *The Weird*, and *A Mountain Walks*.
Forthcoming books by him include the novel *A Pilgrim Stranger* and a new collection of stories *The Revelations of Doctor Prozess.*



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